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Syuu*

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Fujigasaki*

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*A Young Lady
Finds Her True Calling
Living with the Enemy*





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Chapter 1: Married Off to the Enemy

“**LADY** Bertine, I’m ever so excited for your wedding a fortnight hence. This is the first time I have laid eyes on such a divine wedding dress.”

“Thank you. I am also looking forward to the day.”

The home of Marquess du Jeanne, a member of the nobility in the Kingdom of San Luenne, was alive with the hustle and bustle of celebration for his daughter’s impending marriage. Bertine, the young noblewoman in question, surveyed the veritable mountain of gifts sent by her countrymen as well as foreign allies for her wedding ceremony taking place two weeks from today. She found herself exceedingly grateful for the fortune of being born in her nation.

Graced with a beautifully symmetric, oval-shaped face, the twenty-four-year-old passed the time chatting and laughing gaily with her close friends, who had visited her wanting to ooh and aah over her wedding dress. Long, light brown hair extended lushly down to her waist. Green eyes, tilted slightly upward at the corners, brimmed with a strong will and intelligence.

THE Kingdom of San Luenne was a tiny island nation floating in a blue ocean. Nestled against the continent, the small country had been quite poor up until a few decades prior, its only worth lying in salt and seafood. But the king three generations past staked his kingdom’s survival on a course of action designed to transform it into one specializing in tourism. Since then, as a result of his successful gamble, the country has been a leading destination for visitors around the world.

At present, war took place on the neighboring continent, between the Empire of Centaur in the north and the Federation in the south. Both sides fought strenuously at their shared borders, yet the Kingdom of San Luenne did not participate in the battle. It only remitted war funds to the Empire, its ally. The Kingdom simply

could not afford to with its dearth of military personnel. Aside from a squadron of soldiers set to guard the royal palace, it only had a small number of archers posted around the island to defend its maritime territory.

While perusing Bertine's wedding dress and presents, her friends visiting today talked about everything under the sun, from recent events to personal projects. All except the war. Because no one here was concerned about its outcome.

"Did I tell you I started a venture for custom party clutches? They will have glass beads sewn all throughout, which is *just* the rage these days. I already have several orders from imperial princesses."

"Well, I am considering producing wraps made from the finest down. Thin but warm. And light, of course! Sure to be popular among noblewomen as an accoutrement for their ensembles out and about."

NO country had yet attempted an attack on their small nation possessed of such great wealth. There was only one reason for this—the island's environment itself, said to be a "natural fortress." Sharp, jagged reefs enclosed the island, lurking just beneath the water's surface, making it impossible for enormous warships to approach. Even smaller vessels had a challenging time entering the nation. They needed to operate their ships in a complicated set of maneuvers along a designated route, like threading the eye of a needle. If they didn't, they risked tearing holes in their crafts and thereby drowning in the treacherous waters.

Complementing the defense the reefs provided against mainland aggression were the warm currents enfolding the island, responsible for the nation's year-round temperate climate. So blessed by mild weather, imperial citizens visited in droves, both long-term residents who summered and wintered in the Kingdom as well as short-term tourists. Naturally, this allowed the Kingdom's people to earn their fair share of foreign coin.

That same day, even though it was only early afternoon, Bertine's father, a chancellor of their nation, came home in a rush and called for her.

"My lady, my lord bids you to see him in his office at once."

"Understood. I'll head there forthwith."

Bertine excused herself from her friends' company and hastened to answer her father's summons. Upon stepping into his office, she noted his stiff expression. He wasted no time in broaching the subject he wished to discuss.

"The Empire lost to the Federation."

"Oh, well...that's certainly unexpected news. Our country is likely to feel the repercussions as well, yes, Father?"

"Correct, because we aided the Empire through war funds. It should come as no surprise to you that the Federation counts the Kingdom as part of the losing side and has therefore demanded reparations. A colossal sum, no less. One so vast we cannot hope to ever repay it, even infusing the royal family's personal wealth into the nation's assets."

"I see."

Why tell me all this? Despite the impertinent thought, Bertine responded to her father. The marquess sighed heavily and raised his head.

"The Federation agreed to a reduction in the amount in exchange for your betrothal to His Excellency, Cecilio Bonifaccio."

"...Pardon?"

The Marquess Maxim du Jeanne ground his teeth, his face hard with fury over a situation in which he found himself helpless to control. *But why me?* For the life of her, Bertine couldn't grasp what he had just said. *My wedding is in two weeks.* The wild thought lanced through her mind.

"Both our King and his younger brother have only male children. Amongst the six marquessate families, you're the only female of marrying age. Bertine, I beg you to forgive me for being unable to refuse."

"You beg for my forgiveness...? Then that means it is already done?" she asked, her throat dry.

"Yes."

Her father turned his gaze away from her, struggling to contain his fraught emotions. Bertine, face expressionless as she was still unable to process the conversation, lurched from the chair and staggered back to her room. Without so much as a by-your-leave to the marquess. Once in her chamber, she collapsed on the bed, lying there motionless. Dorothée, her lady's maid, stared in confusion.

"Please ask my guests to leave."

"Yes, my lady. Begging your pardon, but is something the

matter?”

“I’m evidently to be married off to His Bloody Excellency Cecilio of the Federation.”

“Whaaat?! P-Preposterous! I’ll return as soon as I encourage our guests to take their leave.”

IN the Kingdom of San Luenne, it was said that the skill to make a fortune is of greater import than the skill to wield arms. “Those who cannot earn have no worth” was the Kingdom’s unofficial motto. So, naturally, Bertine questioned why the royal family couldn’t pay the reparations when they were such stalwart supporters of the sentiment.

After all, they were rich. Did this mean they handed over everything they had to the Empire in assistance of its war efforts? Impossible. There should have been plenty of capital left. She thought it more likely that the nation was reluctant to part with its own coffers, which was why it chose to offer her instead.

Geraldo, Bertine’s older brother, came back from the royal treasury in a panic and confirmed her conjecture.

“His Majesty was apparently of the opinion that the treasury should not be emptied. God, Bertie, I’m so sorry. I should have snatched you up and escaped with you when I had the chance. I’ve failed as your elder brother.”

Though she appreciated the sentiment, she knew that wouldn’t have helped. Her brother was merely a civil official. Even had they fled, it wouldn’t have taken them long to deplete any meager funds in his possession. Besides, where exactly could they have gone? The Empire? As if they wouldn’t have been captured almost immediately as criminals anyway?

“What’s done is done, brother dearest, for ’tis beyond either of us,” she said.

“What’s done is done.” Bertine murmured the phrase over and over again, as if chanting a spell. Otherwise, she would wail abjectly instead, something along the lines of, “I don’t *want* to go! I don’t *want* to be married off to the Federation!”

If only Mother were still alive. Then she would at least hold me in her arms and share my sorrow.

INDIFFERENT to Bertine's grief, the Kingdom proceeded insultingly swiftly with her marriage to a man of the Federation. Not two days after her father's announcement, the process to end her five-year engagement to Andrew commenced. Both families were gathered in a special room designated for nobility in the government office, but only the count, Andrew's father and head of the family, was in attendance. The countess, who had once told Bertine, "I already think of you as my daughter," was markedly absent from the proceedings.

"I take it Lord Andrew won't be joining us today?" Bertine asked.

"I'm sorry, Bertine. He's in a right awful state. I just didn't have the heart to drag him here, depressed as he was."

Her fiancé loved literature, so much so that he'd spoken often of his dream to publish a work of his own while working as a civil servant. Yet clearly, he chose to prioritize his own feelings over any his despondent betrothed might have had about being offered to the enemy. Was she not to receive even a final goodbye from him? She wouldn't be so bold as to say she expected him to rush to her side and spirit her away. But at the very least, she would have liked to know he held enough regard for her that he could deign to give her a few words of comfort, perhaps a simple farewell at the end.

What's done is done. What's done is done. What's done. Is. Done...

Bertine's lips curved in a poor facsimile of a smile as she signed the papers that would undo her engagement.

TWO weeks later. Escorted by the royal guard and waved off by a throng of well-meaning but endlessly curious well-wishers, Bertine boarded a ship bound for the continent. As the Kingdom's scapegoat, she shouldn't have been surprised to attract such a contingent of people so keenly interested in her predicament. Everyone crowded at the harbor whispered to each other, knowing looks on their faces. Not a single individual congratulated her on her nuptials. Because her husband was of the Southern Federation, derided by the peoples of both the Kingdom of San Luenne and the Empire of Centaur as "The land of savages graced too late by the hand of civilization."

For much of its history, the mainland's southern half had been divided amongst dozens of houses, each claiming a small portion for

their own. They had fought continuously with each other for centuries, but in recent years, a man named Cecilio Bonifaccio united the disparate territories under one nation.

“Cecilio is said to be a warmonger, one who enjoys repaying bloodshed with more carnage. He conquered all the other nobles by force alone.”

“I heard he’s an unparalleled womanizer.”

“A barbarian who ridicules culture and art.”

None of the rumors she caught wind of gave her hope. Which explained why her maid, Dorothee, who accompanied her on her journey, hadn’t stopped crying since they departed the marquess’s estate.

“Dorothee. Listen to me. Once I settle into my new life, you are free to return here with the other servants,” Bertine said. “I know your parents are terribly worried for you.”

“I could never, my lady! I shan’t leave you all alone in that awful place!”

“I’ll be fine. I assure you, they won’t kill me. For I shall endeavor to do my utmost to be loved by His Excellency.”

“My lady...my heart breaks for you.”

More sobs wracked Dorothee’s body. By all rights, Bertine should have been the one weeping hysterically, yet she somehow found herself consoling her maid instead.

THE ship docked at a port on the continent, and the five coaches furnished by Bertine’s father for her bridal procession moved in a solemn line toward her final destination. Plunged to the depths of despair by her father’s initial announcement, Bertine had gradually recovered a measure of calm as the days passed by.

“His Excellency might very well be a kind man. Perhaps my life here will be more enjoyable than I imagine. Besides, nothing good can come from being pessimistic.”

Bertine tried to convince herself in her coach, determined to maintain a positive attitude on the last leg of her journey.

TWO weeks later, Bertine’s bridal procession arrived at Ybit, a major hub in the Southern Federation. A large city, it boasted newly

built stone buildings two and three stories high along its streets.

“Oh, my. This is quite different from the rumors,” Bertine mused. “Wouldn’t you agree, Dorothée?”

“Yes, indeed, my lady. I assumed we’d be met with wooden or even fur-lined tents.”

“Come now, Dorothée, that’s unconscionably rude, and you know it. Though I can’t deny the information I have about the Federation seems to be quite outdated as well.”

Bertine and her maid were able to laugh about such things up until their arrival at Cecilio’s estate.

Chapter 2: Cecilio's Estate

WHEN they arrived at Cecilio Bonifaccio's estate, they were greeted by a decidedly inelegant manse.

"My lady, this is, well, certainly something," Dorothee whispered.

"Less an estate and more of a..."

Stronghold, but Bertine refrained from finishing her sentence. She certainly didn't want to cast judgment on her new home.

A young man came through the main entrance. She didn't see any others on the grounds. *I wonder if that is His Excellency*, she thought as she disembarked from the carriage. The bride, presumably soon to be lady of the house, had arrived, yet no servants awaited her in welcome.

The young man stepped in front of her and introduced himself.

"My name is Ignacio and I'm the secretary for the head of the Federation. Are you the daughter of Marquess du Jeanne, Bertine du Jeanne?"

"I am."

"A room has been prepared for you. Please follow me."

Bertine nodded in acknowledgment and began walking after him, but she couldn't shake a sense of unease. His attitude wasn't nearly as welcoming as she expected.

"If I may speak frankly, I find myself surprised by His Excellency's conspicuous absence here despite the coming of his bride," Bertine said.

"Allow me to explain."

His stride unwavering, Ignacio responded to her, still facing ahead. He led her to a guest chamber, instead of a suite designed for the lady of the house. An expressionless maid poured tea and set out a tray of refreshments before expediently exiting. Only the three of them remained in the room.

"I have two things to convey. First, His Excellency is currently not in residence here. He has been called away to a province hit by extreme flooding. I can't say for certain when he'll return."

"I see."

Understandable, since it's a national emergency.

"Second, you seem to be operating under a misunderstanding, Lady du Jeanne, so permit me to correct you," Ignacio continued. "The Federation didn't, in fact, desire a matrimonial partner from the Empire for His Excellency. We requested monetary reparations from the losing side for this latest battle, *not* a bride."

"The losing side, you say..."

"Therefore, as soon as you've recovered from your journey, please return to your country."

Bertine was at a loss for words. She couldn't fashion a response no matter how hard she tried. The citizens of the Kingdom of San Luenne had no conception that their country had been a party to war. "Why, the Kingdom naturally financed the Empire's campaign because we're indebted to them." A sentiment like this was as far as her people's awareness extended, but clearly it was leagues apart from how the Federation viewed the conflict.

According to her father and older brother, the King of San Luenne himself had evidently complained, "Not only does the Empire receive our financial support for the war, but they also expect us to give them more funds should they lose." Thus the decision to send Bertine in exchange for reduced reparations. The Kingdom thought to decrease their liability by exchanging a young noblewoman of their own to the so-called savages.

Now that she discovered otherwise, Bertine wondered if the Federation's rejection of the proposal had arrived before she left her country. *It doesn't matter now, does it?* The bitter thought flashed through her mind immediately.

"I traveled to this nation with the intention of offering my life in service to its development, by His Excellency's side. But based on what you're telling me, I take it such a role is unnecessary, yes?" Bertine queried.

"Unfortunately, it is as you say."

Going home is out of the question. Because Bertine could see plain as day the malicious gossip awaiting her should she return to the Kingdom. "She couldn't fulfill her duty to our country? How useless." "He refused to marry her." "Defiled goods is what she is now." Except her standing wouldn't be the only one affected. Her father and brother would suffer the ignominy as well. And what punishment would His Majesty inflict on her, even though he was

the one who had arranged this farce of a marriage? No, there was no going back for her.

“Understood. Then in the interim, I shall withdraw from my role as His Excellency’s intended bride,” she said. “But that does not mean I’ll meekly accept the Federation’s dismissal of my existence because I can no longer return to my homeland. After all, I traveled here at the behest of our king himself. Therefore, won’t you *kindly* grant me the time I need to consider my future?”

Bertine clasped her hands together to hide the tremors that wanted to snake through. Spine ramrod straight, she even smiled winningly as she appealed to Ignacio. She had no desire to disgrace herself in this foreign land, and it was the only thought giving her strength right now. Lord knows she would have already swooned from the shocking news without the rigorous education in comportment she’d received as one befitting her station.

“Very well. Then you may stay in this guest room until His Excellency returns. When he does, I shall consult him about what comes next.”

“That sounds fine to me. Thank you very much.”

BERTINE’S brave facade remained firmly in place throughout their discussion. But the moment Ignacio stepped out of the room, every ounce of strength leached from her frame, leaving her utterly limp against the back of the sofa. She had consumed her entire store of energy in a relatively short amount of time. Dorothee immediately rushed to her side and crouched down, grasping her hands.

“My lady!”

“What a nasty little surprise, hm, Dorothee? It makes me curious if the government of San Luenne knew that His Excellency Cecilio rejected their offer before they dispatched me. At the very least, I strongly suspect the Empire was well aware, considering its people acted as intermediary between the Kingdom and the Federation. Though the question remains if they informed His Majesty.”

“I don’t comprehend any of this, my lady. The only thing I know for certain is that this is all too much!”

“Now I have no one to rely on. I’ve lost every place I can remotely call home.”

Bertine could stave off the worst by trading the gold coins and

jewels her father had insisted she take with her. If eating and breathing were all that were required of her, she could even stretch those funds for an indefinite amount of time. But she knew her star had fallen dramatically, her life already gone to the dogs. Sold off by the Empire and her homeland, then rendered unnecessary by the Federation. The people of this country would no doubt be unsparing in their attitudes toward her, a citizen of the enemy.

“What am I supposed to do?” she said aloud.

The manners of nobility had been drilled relentlessly into her since the moment she took her first steps as a babe. As the daughter of a marquess, she had been privileged to learn history, culture, and foreign languages. She could dance any number of dances, their multitude of steps carved indelibly into her memory by way of her aching feet. Her knowledge of business, earned through her own fierce determination. All had come to naught. It felt like her entire life up until now, her very existence itself, had been repudiated.

“How could it have come to this...”

Bertine sensed herself sinking deep into the swamps of despair, unable to bear it any longer.

Then she heard some sort of commotion coming from the hallway outside. An agitated voice. In the next instant, the door banged open violently before a young woman stormed inside, her heels clacking imperiously on the floor.

“Whoever might *you* be?” Dorothee demanded. “Have you no manners, to not even knock before entering a person’s room?!”

The woman ignored Dorothee’s undaunted rebuke as the maid rushed up in outrage. Attitude militant, she approached Bertine, who refused to stand and raised only her head.

“You! Are you that blasted woman from the Empire?”

“And if I am?”

“You’re a shameless one, aren’t you?! Charging into our country uninvited, despite having yours defeated! And to brazenly propose marriage to Lord Cecilio, no less!”

“Whatever I have come here to do is of no concern to you. Leave. Now.”

Bertine’s voice was flat, her entire demeanor listless as she remained on the sofa. In response, the black-haired woman stomped one foot, planted her hands on her hips, and raised her voice.

“It has everything to do with me. For *I* am Lord Cecilio’s fiancée. Moreover, we are to be wed *very* soon. So, while *I* have

every right to reprimand a spinster from the enemy country, *you* do not have the right to command me to leave!”

Unmoving in her seat, Bertine unabashedly surveyed the other woman from head to toe.

“I see. So *you* are His Excellency’s fiancée. Goodness, gracious me. Seeing as His Excellency’s tastes run toward vulgar children, it’s quite clear he has no reason to seek my attention,” Bertine said. “Unfortunately for you, my sojourn here has been granted by Ignacio. Accordingly, I suggest you take your complaints to him. Since you are *only* his betrothed, you are not in fact a member or lady of this house. Now then, you are to take your leave from this room at once.”

So saying, Bertine rose leisurely and stood face to face with her opponent. Only a hairsbreadth separated them. Her posture was impeccably regal. She knew the young woman could be no more than sixteen or seventeen years old. Both her skin and tresses shone with the vitality of youth.

“Well? I will not repeat myself,” Bertine said, her tone firm. “But if you insist on shutting your ears to the simple request, then I shall insist on slapping you again and again until you understand the meaning of the word, ‘leave.’”

“H-How dare you! I-If it’s a fight you want, it’s a fight you’ll get!”

When Bertine picked up the fan she had placed on top of the table, the young girl made to leap at her. Up until that moment, the guards had stood watching the spectacle with their arms folded. But the moment she sprung, they rushed into action, surrounding the girl. Then they promptly escorted her out of the room.

Dorothée hurried to lock the door and Bertine once more collapsed on the sofa. They could still hear the girl’s infuriated shrieks from the other side.

So he was already betrothed. A particularly proud noblewoman in my position would have sliced her own throat and died by her own hand instead of subjecting herself to such indignity. A good thing I’m not so fussed, then.

Exhaustion dug its fingers into her body while Bertine recalled the girl’s words. It was the first time in her life such cruelty had been directed at her. She had been forcefully reminded of her worth in this country. Though a part of her was wounded, another burned with anger. *As if I can die after being abused by a child like that. If I*

perished here, she would undoubtedly dance in victory on my grave.

Lying prone on the sofa, Bertine closed her eyes and brooded fixedly for some time.

SHE wondered how much time had passed in her motionless, meditative state. Dorothée watched over Bertine silently, wringing her hands anxiously.

When the light streaming through the window changed angles dramatically, a single door in Bertine's heart slammed shut. For there was no longer any place for her in the glittering world on its other side.

"I've made my decision," she declared.

"My lady?"

She couldn't depend on her father or her status. But she would not roll over and die. She would gain the strength to survive in this country on her own. And she would grow so strong, nothing and no one could ever hurt her again. Not the homeland that sold her off. Not that insolent little girl. And certainly not her former fiancé, who could not bring himself to leave her with even a single word of comfort.

Bertine stretched her hand out and picked up the teacup resting on the table. Then she downed the cold liquid in a single swallow.

Chapter 3: Leaving

FROM that night on, Bertine and Dorothée truly realized they were in enemy territory.

First, meals were difficult to procure. When some *were* provided, the portions were laughably small and cold to boot. Dinner on their first night was ice-cold stew. Breakfast the next day consisted of tepid tea and two pieces of stale bread rolls. No one came to tidy their guest room either. Never mind hot water for washing their faces, they weren't even given hot tea. Around two o'clock in the afternoon, the lunch they received was a terribly small portion of some sort of fried food, all dried up.

What made the entire ordeal more malicious was the fact that meals weren't entirely withheld. The sporadic deliveries indicated that someone was doing their job in the kitchen. Clearly nothing more than the bare minimum.

Bertine lost her patience on the afternoon of the fourth day. With Dorothée accompanying her, she marched to the butler's room in the servant's quarters and appealed for an improvement in their living conditions. But the elderly butler only dredged up an artificial smile and responded with an awfully barbed politeness.

"I do so apologize for the discourtesy you've been shown. I shall admonish the staff in the galley myself. But if you would refrain from such indiscreet behavior yourself, I would be much obliged. Otherwise, you risk being mocked as 'the noblewoman from the Empire who stormed the servants' quarters in search of food.'"

A few maids nearby tittered snidely upon hearing that.

Humiliation and anger reddened Bertine's cheeks brilliantly, but she remained undaunted. She raised her chin and responded coolly.

"Thank you ever so kindly for your gracious assistance."

Having said her piece, she returned to her room. Though Dorothée trembled with fury over the encounter, Bertine did not regret the necessary exchange. She just couldn't bear the thought of

the other servants she had brought with her suffering from pangs of hunger and thirst.

"I understand that butler is old enough to remember the days when he had to watch the southern lands bled dry by the Empire's aggression. He rightfully has many a reason to loathe us. I'll grant him this grace and find a solution to this situation myself."

"But we're not even citizens of the Empire, my lady!"

"As far as he's concerned, the Empire of Centaur and the Kingdom of San Luenne are one and the same. In fact, he might even despise our country more considering the aspersions the Federation casts on us for being akin to remora leeching off the underside of the Empire."

Bertine withdrew Luennian currency from her luggage and strode toward the door. Opening it, she spoke to the two guards outside with a winsome smile.

"Might I head into the city to perform a currency exchange? Since my people and I aren't being provided with proper meals and water, I think it best if I purchase the goods myself. Oh, one more thing. Please relay a message to Master Ignacio. I would very much like to discuss the reception we've received thus far."

Her mantle of courtesy remained firmly in place. She knew she'd be doing herself and her servants a grave disservice if she garnered the guards' animosity at this stage.

"No meals or water? That's impossible..."

"I assure you it's quite possible. I'd rather not cause a great deal of fuss by collapsing from hunger, so please do allow me to take a trip outside."

The guards started mumbling excuses one after the other to her, something about just doing their shifts and how they and their fellows had only been assigned to stand duty here.

"I understand, and of course, I'm not blaming you at all, so please don't misunderstand. After all, I was the one who had that awful row with His Excellency's betrothed."

Both of the men started in surprise at that last bit.

"Beg your pardon? Betrothed? But he isn't engaged..."

"He's right. Lady Bianca has taken it upon herself to declare she is. And without His Excellency's knowledge, I'd wager."

Their words and tone made it clear they held no great affection for the girl. *Ah-ha, I see. So she isn't his fiancée. Well, it's too little, too late to find this out now, since it hardly matters. Especially*

in light of the fact that His Excellency would much prefer monetary reparations to me.

"Then you will allow me to venture into the city to make some necessary purchases?"

"Yes, and we should be glad to accompany you."

Bertine nodded with a beatific smile that epitomized a daughter of nobility.

"I'm heartened by your offer and I thank you for it. I shall be in your care."

AMONGST the plethora of languages used in the Federation, Bertine had only studied the official language. All because her father was of the mind that "trade with the Federation, rich as it is in untapped resources, particularly in gemstone oreshafts, is not to be undertaken lightly."

He had been quite insistent too on his philosophy concerning the Federation.

"You cannot surpass others by doing the same thing as them. And it's entirely within the realm of possibilities that someday the peoples of the south will overtake the Empire in might."

So she had learned this nation's official tongue and now found herself tremendously grateful for his foresight.

Bertine stepped into her carriage after preparations were complete, and one of the servants she'd brought from the Kingdom took the reins in hand. In a moment, they were off, accompanied by the guards on horseback. It had been too long since she'd stepped foot outside, so she breathed deeply of the bracingly fresh air. The clear blue sky soothed the agitation within her chest.

"FIRST, I'd like to visit a currency exchange."

"Ah, there should be one in that direction. Allow me to lead you."

"Thank you."

It hadn't taken the guards long to follow Bertine's instructions without qualms. Though the gentle smile on her lips never wavered, she was well aware of the aura that cloaked her, one unique to those in command. The guards, presumably commoners, were

steadily and unknowingly drawn in by the atmosphere she created.

A man named Cirro owned the moneylending and exchange business she'd been directed to. He quickly sized up Bertine as she stepped into his shop garbed in attire popular in the Empire. *She is undeniably an imperial aristocrat, and a high-ranking one at that*, he thought to himself. On the inside, he grinned gleefully at the chance to do business with such a wealthy customer. But on the outside, he pasted on his salesman's smile and spoke.

"How might I be of service?"

Though he couldn't hide his eagerness as he gave the impression of one cheerfully rubbing his hands together in anticipation.

"I'd like to perform a currency change. Please exchange the Empire's gold coins into Federation silver and copper currency."

This country's coinage had been established by the Empire during its long period of imperialism. It was one of the many ways in which San Luenne's ally had left its mark on the southlands. Therefore, despite the designs on the coins being different, the size and proportion of metal in each coin, as well as the system of exchanging gold, silver, and copper coins remained the same as in the Empire.

A small mountain of coins formed on the desk in front of Cirro after he exchanged the twenty pieces of imperial gold coins Bertine offered for silver and copper ones at a designated rate.

"Suppose I were to sell this gem. At how much would you estimate its value?"

She presented to him a pendant with a gem known as a "pigeon blood ruby." It dazzled the eye with its brilliant scarlet hue. In the Empire, it was said to fetch a price worth thirty large gold coins.

"Well, let me see. I do see some flaws in the clarity, so perhaps twenty large gold coins."

Cirro glanced surreptitiously at Bertine. His gaze challenged her to bargain with him. She only smiled grimly in response before speaking.

"Oh, dear. I'm shocked to hear such a bid, considering it would go for as much as forty large gold coins in the Empire. It seems I'll have to take my business elsewhere. Thank you, though."

So saying, she reached for the pendant again, intending to put it back in her reticule.

"Now, now, no need to be so hasty. If you're in a difficult situation, I can be generous and increase my offer to twenty-five instead."

"That's hardly the case, good sir. I simply am in the mood to indulge myself with an extravagant dress. But I shan't pawn off a gift from my grandmother so cheaply. Unfortunately, it seems the stars will not align for us today, hm? Perhaps next time."

"Then how about thirty large gold coins?"

"I think thirty-five should do it. I know they must be worth at least that much."

"Thirty-two!"

"Thirty-three. I can't accept any less than that."

Although Cirro knew his chance to make a killing off the necklace had long since disappeared (*perhaps I can make a modest profit yet*), he agreed to thirty-three. The guards, standing behind her, whispered quietly to each other in astonishment after witnessing the rapid-fire negotiation.

"Oy, she knows how to drive a hard bargain. I thought she was a marquess's daughter?"

"I'm just as surprised as you, mate. She's damn good at it too."

BERTINE'S lady's maid, Dorothee, couldn't be more overjoyed inside. Conducting price negotiations was the most basic of basics in her homeland, the Kingdom of San Luenne. Even the nobles knew better than to accept a price at face value. For it was a small nation that came into existence solely on the basis of its strength in commerce. If one thought such an attitude vulgar, one would find themselves quickly falling behind others.

From Dorothee's perspective, Lady Bertine still had a long way to go when it came to negotiations. *But she can do it if she tries. All she needed was the opportunity.* And it was good enough for her.

BERTINE shut away the proceeds from the pendant's sale in her small but high-quality bag and exited the shop. Her next destination was a general store. There, she sold off her unused, embroidered handkerchief for four small silver coins. After perusing the various wares on display, she bought twenty plain, white silk

handkerchiefs.

“Now it’s time to buy food and water,” she said.

“My lady, we will be *certain* to admonish the kitchen, so you really needn’t purchase them.”

The two guards tried to stop her again. Though she believed in their honest natures, she didn’t trust the butler a whit. He was different from them.

“Thank you, kind sirs,” she said to the guards. “But you need not worry. I insist on buying everything myself before we return.”

I fear next time they will send us a meal with rubbish in it. She managed to swallow the words before they inadvertently escaped. When she noticed the uncomfortable expressions on the guards’ faces, she smiled broadly at them to assure them she didn’t think poorly of them at all. Then she turned toward the grocer’s and entered the building. She bought foodstuffs that didn’t require cooking, several casks of water, and a few other supplies.

It was her last stop, so she returned to the manse with the two guards.

“You went to a great deal of trouble on my behalf, so please take this as a token of my appreciation.” She handed a small bottle of a distilled spirit to each one.

“No, my lady, we can’t accept this.”

“Please. I may require your assistance again. Do allow me to express my gratitude with this.”

The gentle smile on Bertine’s face flustered them because it amplified her beauty.

“Then we gladly accept your gift. Thank you very much.”

Each man tucked his bottle away inside his breast pocket.

THE five servants she’d brought with her from San Luenne had been allotted one room, and they were all awfully emaciated. After she handed over the food and water to them, she gave them some words of encouragement.

“I’ll make sure to send you all back home soon, so please be patient just a little longer.”

Then she returned to her own room. Once inside, she sighed softly.

“Right, then, what’s my next step?”

“My lady, I shall remain even if the others leave. I will

personally see to it that you survive in this country. Otherwise, I fear my nerves will never recover from my concern for you.”

“Dorothée, I...”

Up until this moment, Bertine had been doing her best to endure the situation. But Dorothée’s words made her so happy and thankful she felt tears spring to her eyes. She hurriedly covered her face with both hands to hide them. Though she had put on a brave face throughout their stay here, the frosty reception and overpowering hunger she’d experienced chipped away at her soul more than she could have imagined.

“Good lord. I’m clearly still just a babe in the woods if something as trifling as this makes me cry,” Bertine said. “Since I have time to sob, then it means I have time to write to Father and let him know in uncertain terms that His Excellency would much rather have reparations than me.”

Chapter 4: Cecilio's Return

LATER that same night, Ignacio visited Bertine's room in a bit of a panic. Only a few moments earlier, she and Dorothée had arranged some of the food she'd bought on the table so they could eat supper. Bertine looked exhausted as she dined on bread, dried meat, an apple, and water.

Upon entering the room, a single glance told Ignacio how badly he and the rest of the staff had blundered.

"I sincerely apologize for the lack of leadership and consideration displayed thus far." He bowed his head.

"Did the guards speak to you then?" Bertine asked.

"Uh, yes. I had no idea you and your people had gone so long without food and water. Again, I'm terribly sorry..."

"They sent up dinner earlier, but we had no desire whatsoever to partake of anything those awful people made," she said. "After all, food is something one consumes precisely because they trust the individuals making it, yes?"

Ignacio nodded in mortification.

"On that note, Ignacio, I plan on departing tomorrow. If I continue to remain here, I'll just be known as the woman demanding to be made His Excellency's wife. And I will not suffer such misery. I intended to wait until His Excellency returned, but I have had more than enough of this nonsense."

"Lady du Jeanne, I realize it would be too difficult for you to return to your homeland, but might I suggest a sojourn to the Empire? I would be more than happy to help you in this regard."

Bertine only smiled sadly.

"I cannot. To choose such a path means giving the Empire an opportunity to cast false aspersions on the Kingdom of San Luenne. For my father is a chancellor, you see. No, I shall strive to do my best in this country."

It was heartbreaking to listen to the daughter of a marquess speak with such resignation. The tableau was made worse by the simple but common fare of bread and water she consumed.

Nevertheless, Ignacio accepted Bertine's wishes.

"I insist on introducing you to a trustworthy property agency. It's the least I can do, so please take my letter of introduction with you," he told her.

THAT night, Bertine and Dorothée packed their belongings. The next morning, the guards they'd come to trust kindly transported their luggage to her carriage. Followed by the carriages holding Dorothée and the rest of her servants from San Luenne, Bertine left Cecilio's estate.

SEVERAL hours later, Bertine handed over two things to the five servants who had accompanied her to this country. One was a letter to her father containing a general outline of events. And the second was a few gold coins she told them to use for their travel expenses on their journey back to San Luenne. She had confirmed that with the end of the war, ships once more passed between the Kingdom and the Federation.

Though they wept bitterly over Bertine's misfortune, they also were overjoyed to return home. Once the farewells were said and done, they boarded the coach Bertine had hired for them. It left, bound for the port.

After seeing them off, the first thing Bertine and Dorothée decided to do was buy clothes. Bertine's outfits in particular, fashioned after the style worn by imperial aristocrats, were too conspicuous here. They had wasted no time changing into their new attire in the shop and now wore dresses bourgeoisie women of the Federation favored.

Clad in their new clothes and shoes, they entered their carriage. It too had been replaced by an unassuming second-hand one. Bertine had sold the five coaches her father had furnished her for a handsome sum. Her fattened wallet with its fresh infusion of gold coins attested to the sale. She had also sold off the rest of the bulky, valuable items her father had insisted she take with her.

"Dorothée, I'm so glad you studied the Federation's official language with me. I don't know what I would have done if you couldn't speak it," Bertine said, appreciation lacing her tone.

“To be frank, my lady, I had not enjoyed being your conversation partner back during your education, but now I’m truly grateful for the experience myself.”

“Say, Dorothee, how do you think Father will react when he reads my letter and discovers I shan’t be coming home?”

“Well, considering my lord’s position as chancellor, I’m not sure he *can* tell you to return. But I will remain steadfastly by your side, my lady.”

“I’m invincible so long as I have you.”

Once the two of them were alone, Bertine read Ignacio’s letter of introduction then shred it to pieces without hesitation.

“He wrote that I should be treated well because I’m the daughter of a marquess from the Kingdom of San Luenne,” Bertine sighed. “Despite knowing very well that it would only hinder me tremendously if others knew my background. Because as far as the people of this country are concerned, I’m just a silly woman from the losing side who shamelessly tried to become their champion’s wife.”

“Hm, yes, I see your concern. Anyone here would wonder why they needed to ‘treat you well’ in such circumstances.”

“We’ll take our time making the rounds with merchants in this country without revealing my true identity. You shall take the lead and I will be your maid,” Bertine said.

THEY were currently in a real estate office on the outskirts of the capital.

Bertine had donned an ensemble fit for a lady’s maid in this nation, finished off by a neat white cap unique to the role here. She kept her eyes downcast and walked behind Dorothee as they visited various merchants. The first two realtors didn’t have any properties that met their needs, but the third one showed them a building that met the specifications of the two female clients.

NIGHT fell. Bertine and Dorothee were in a small house. It boasted a tiny front yard and a reasonably large backyard. Though old, the building was situated in a sunny location and functioned as both a commercial and residential space. Up until two months ago, an

elderly couple had lived there while operating their general store.

“Let’s determine what is in demand here before we decide the trajectory of our business,” Bertine said. “There’s no need to rush either, since we can survive for some time just fine.”

“My lady, I’m sure you’ll make it a raging success.”

“At the end of every war, the first thing people seek is delicious food. After that, comes everything else, such as pretty trinkets and things to soothe the soul. Or so I learned. Our opportunity lies somewhere amongst these options. I know it.”

Dorotheé began preparing a simple dinner for the two of them and Bertine helped her. Bertine moved awkwardly, unfamiliar with the process but determined to learn. Once it was ready, they sat down at the table and toasted each other with inexpensive wine. A tipsy Bertine made the following declaration, her face tense.

“Dorotheé, listen. You know that saying? ‘The people of San Luenne fall, but something will always get them back on their feet.’ Well, I want you to watch me as I perform it in action.”

“My lady, I must point out that the citizens of other countries say this about us as an insult. Yet for some reason, I find myself looking forward to your interpretation of it. Please make sure to add cooking to your growing repertoire, hm?”

“Thank you, Dorotheé.”

And so, the former marquess’s daughter and lady’s maid began their new life together.

CECILIO Bonifaccio, the face and de facto leader of the Southern Federation, returned to his estate ten nights after Bertine left it. He flew into a rage upon hearing the particulars of Bertine du Jeanne’s stay and the circumstances that facilitated her flight from Ignacio and the guards.

“Summon all the staff immediately!” he roared.

The servants filed into their lord’s office and formed a line. Faces deathly pale, they stared down at the floor. Cecilio was exhausted from his time in the flooded region, but his anger made him forget his fatigue.

“So long as you lot continue to behave as foolishly as you did with our guest, the Federation will continue to be derided as a country of savages. What will it take to drill that through your thick skulls?! She only traveled to enemy territory at the behest of her

country, yet you all had the gall to treat her so abominably. I hope you're proud of yourselves. And to think such lowly behavior occurred at *my* estate. Did none of you ever consider that *she* was just another victim of this damned political situation?"

"Forgive us, my lord!"

The housekeeper and butler were the first to apologize, bowing deeply in penance. The others soon followed.

"I will *not* give you another chance. Should you decide to act in such a way that stains the Federation's reputation with filth again, you *will* be punished accordingly. Remember that. I'll go see her first thing tomorrow morning and apologize. You're dismissed. Out of my sight."

So saying, Cecilio Bonifaccio dragged his fingers through his black, shoulder-length hair. Then he turned his ice-cold, sapphire-colored eyes to Ignacio. Clearly ill at ease, Ignacio bowed his head in response.

"I introduced her to a reputable realtor and also provided her with a letter of introduction, so it should not take long to ascertain her whereabouts," he said.

"Why didn't you send her home?" Cecilio asked. "From the young lady's perspective, she's surrounded by enemies on all sides."

"She very firmly refused my offer to do so."

"Haaa... I see. Fine. What's done is done. You're dismissed as well. Wait, one more thing. Bianca is indefinitely forbidden from visiting this manse. I erred in showing her too much lenience just because her father is an influential man. The girl has remarkable audacity in passing herself off as my fiancée. I refuse to believe it was a misunderstanding on her part, either. No, it was deliberate, and I'll make my grievances known to her father myself."

ALONE once more in his study, the anger continued burning within Cecilio. But he chose to exorcize it after some time by slamming both hands down on his large desk.

Long had he aspired to protect the people of his nation from famine. Elevate the nation's culture of learning so richly that it would rival even the Empire in this respect. The very same Empire of Centaur that had exploited his people's ignorance and robbed them of their country's resources of iron, gold, silver, and grains with despicable bargains. Cecilio had always hated the Empire for

treating his country like a colony under its thumb.

Which was why he hadn't been satisfied succeeding his father as the head of their tribe. Instead, he had parlayed with dozens of other clan leaders and convinced them to unite under the banner of one nation. "Equality with the Empire." With that goal in mind, Cecilio went to the Empire and studied their philosophy and society, all the while looked down on by its citizens.

Ten years. It had taken ten long years to unify the tribes, battle the Empire, and at the age of thirty-five, finally secure his country's victory against it. But he couldn't even control the servants closest to him.

"At first light tomorrow, I'll go to apologize."

Cecilio's quiet promise to himself managed to settle his agitation.

THE next day.

"What do you mean she never came here?" Cecilio asked. "Are you sure? An aristocratic young lady bearing Ignacio's letter of introduction never showed up?"

"Yes, my lord. Such a person has never visited this office."

The realtor's words stunned Cecilio into momentary silence. Then he gathered his thoughts quickly. Victory in the war had the entire nation in buoyantly high spirits. He hurriedly ordered a search to be executed for the marquess's daughter, worried that overly excited hooligans may have gotten carried away and harmed her.

But his people turned up no clues because every realtor they questioned had never met a noblewoman resembling Bertine. She had disappeared without a trace.

Chapter 5: The Candy Ma'am and Destitute Evance

IN the first few days after moving into their rented house, Bertine and Dorothée worked hard at weeding both yards. They also cleaned and polished the floors till they shined, leaving the door to the house wide open as they did. On one such day, three children who seemed to be residents of the neighborhood gathered outside their house. There were two boys and one girl.

"Did you just move in?"

"We did. Nice to meet you all," Bertine greeted them.

"Are you going to open a shop? What sort?"

"Mmm, we still haven't decided."

"Whaaat?! You're weird!"

"Hehe. Now that you mention it, I think you're right. Oh, I have candy. Would you like some?"

"Hooray! Candy!"

Bertine had purchased the candies during her shopping trip when a sudden craving for something sweet overtook her. She went outside with the whole tin in her hand.

"One for each of you, hm?"

Once she distributed the candies to the children, they looked up at her innocently.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"See you again soon, candy ma'am."

They left after saying their piece.

"Ma'am..." Bertine repeated.

"You mustn't take it personally, my lady. From a child's perspective, every adult woman might as well be an old one."

Dorothée comforted Bertine as she stood there frozen, eyes blinking rapidly in shock. Devastated by the exchange, she pulled out her portable hand mirror and peered at her reflection. Her tired, unmade face stared back at her.

"Well, I can't rightly argue with them since this most certainly is the face of an old woman. Henceforth, I should at the very least

make my face up when I venture outside, hm?"

A slightly dejected Bertine went back into the house.

"Why don't we sup at a restaurant tonight?" Bertine suggested. "Dorothée, you've been working tirelessly these past few days as well. You need a break too."

"Are you quite sure you wouldn't mind my company, my lady?"

"Oh, please, stop that. You're the only one I can depend on, you know. Besides, I don't know anyone else here, do I? So please join me."

"Of course, I'd be happy to."

AND so the two of them chose a restaurant nearby, a type Bertine would never have considered during her life as the daughter of a marquess. A lively place, its tables, chairs, and floor would just barely pass a health inspection. But myriad delectable aromas greeted them the moment they stepped inside.

"Welcome! Please sit wherever you like. I'll be with you shortly to take your orders!"

The woman's smile and energetic voice prompted them to occupy an empty table. After they sat down, the two women perused the menu pasted to the wall nearby. They decided to order pork stew, a vegetable medley soup, skewers of grilled shellfish, bread, and ale.

They didn't have to wait long for their food to arrive. Just as they were about to dig into their meal, a large but feeble-looking man entered the restaurant.

"Pardon me for the intrusion, but might you share some food with me? I have no money, you see. Of course, I'll repay you in kind. I'll do anything: clean the floors and wash the dishes! I was robbed of all my belongings, so I have not a coin to my name."

Silence instantly replaced the cheerful din of noise and conversation inside. Immediately after he finished relating his tale of woe, the proprietress spoke.

"How can you come to a restaurant without money? Absurd. I have plenty of staff, thank you. Now then, would you kindly leave? If you don't, I shall summon the garrison."

She's right. If she gave charity to every person who came begging, her establishment would go out of business very quickly. While Bertine

agreed wholeheartedly with the owner, she couldn't help recalling the awful excuse for food she'd been forced to eat for the three and a half days at His Excellency's residence. Both her body and soul had been miserable from the hunger she'd experienced then. She swallowed some ale and then acted. *It doesn't hurt to play the virtuous stranger once in a while.*

"I'll pay for his meal," she said to the proprietress. Then she turned to the man. "Please join us."

"My lady!"

Dorothée spoke urgently to her in a hushed tone, but Bertine shook her head in response.

"I've become quite sensitive to the word 'hunger' after practically starving our first few days here."

"Are you sure, miss?" The proprietress questioned her with a concerned expression.

"Yes, it's fine."

The man had been watching their exchange with a hopeful look in his eyes.

"Please, sit." Bertine indicated the empty chair next to her and he sat down gratefully in it.

"Thank you very much," he said. "I thought I'd collapse from starvation. I've only had water these past two days."

"You can order whatever you like. Would you care for some ale?"

"Are you certain? Yes, please! My name is Evance and I sincerely thank you for your kindness."

That was the last thing he said for some time as he ravenously started on the food. Grilled meat, grilled fish, soup, bread, stew, ale. He sampled the dishes in that order then hailed the server for more meat. He finished his flagon of ale and asked for another. Bertine and Dorothée smiled ruefully as they watched him devour the food.



The grilled meat was pork covered in a seasoned sauce combined with roughly chopped onions. The fat in the meat melted richly with every bite. It paired well with the onions, cooked to the point they still retained a slight crunch, and ale.

The fish was a freshwater type, its flaky white meat flavored with finely chopped herbs to dispel the fishy smell. The skin was crisp and savory. It seemed to have been grilled over a bed of charcoal, considering a faint hint of the coals remained. This was the first time Bertine found the skin of a fish delicious.

“My lady, this is the first time I’ve had this shellfish,” Dorotheé said.

“I as well,” Bertine replied. “Despite being a clam, it doesn’t smell like the ocean. It must have been caught in a river then. It’s so soft, I could eat these forever.”

Evan only nodded as he continued eating. He seemed to be in his late twenties. He had red curly hair and freckles dotted his face. He looked like a mischievous child who had instantly transformed into an adult, so there was no denying his boyish charm. But his height easily surpassed six feet and he had a fine physique, sporting arms as thick as Bertine’s thighs.

“Ahhh, I feel alive again!”

He spoke ecstatically after emptying the plates on the table. He chuckled softly, gray eyes narrowed in contentment. Only a crescent-shaped sliver peeked through his lowered lids.

“That was delicious. Thank you so much again,” he said. “Do you two ladies live in the area? I arrived here from a small town in the countryside, south of the city. Thieves stole all my worldly possessions as soon as I reached Ybit. That’s when I learned how frightening large cities really are.”

“How extremely unfortunate for you! What made you travel to Ybit?” Bertine asked.

“I want to become an architect. I visited several companies specializing in the field, but none of them would give me the time of day.”

Bertine had met several architects back when she still lived in San Luenne, but their personalities and aura were markedly different from his.

“Oh, right,” he said. “I may have been robbed of all my belongings, but I still have the finished blueprint of the house I

want to build.”

He withdrew several sheets of paper from his breast pocket. One had an illustration of an incredibly bizarre building. It was an oval-shaped bungalow with a thatched grass roof. Another showed a tall structure that couldn't rightly be called a house with the way it was designed because a slender spiral staircase wound down its central axis with small rooms attached here and there to the staircase. His other drawings showcased similarly fantastical abodes, like the sort found in fairy tales.

“Ah, no wonder you weren't employed by any of them. Was it because you showed them these designs?” Bertine guessed.

“I did. I suspected that was the case, but still, I hoped that at least one company in a city as large as this one would show good judgment and appreciate my work.”

“Except that is precisely why they weren't receptive. Houses like these aren't in demand in a city,” Bertine pointed out. “Though I do think you might fare better in a place like the Kingdom of San Luenne with its many wealthy visitors from the Empire. Actually, on second thought, perhaps not even there. My apologies for making such a rash statement.”

Bertine's frank evaluation visibly disappointed Evance. Watching him, a strange thought began to form in her mind. Hazy and shapeless, it nevertheless grew. *For now, it'd be best if I didn't let this giant out of my sight.* That was the only concrete thing her heart could tell her at the moment. Besides, hadn't Father insisted to the point of madness that “You cannot surpass others by doing the same thing as them?”

“Evance, do you have lodgings for the night?” she asked. “If not, you may stay with us in exchange for being our bodyguard.”

“My lady, why not just give him enough money to find an inn? You really don't have to go so far for him.”

“It's fine. I'm not particularly concerned about what our neighbors might think. Especially because I don't have anything to lose anymore. Still, to be on the safe side, I'll lock your room from the outside since we *are* two women alone,” she said to Evance. “Which means you won't be able to get out at night. That said, are you still amenable to my offer?”

“Yes! That's not a problem for me at all!”

“Then it's settled.”

THEY ate and drank plenty before Bertine paid the bill and they exited the restaurant. Outside, she encountered the young boy she'd met in the afternoon to whom she'd given candy. He held his younger sister's hand.

"Oh, my, why are you still out here?" she addressed them. "It's pitch-dark, no? You must go home quickly."

The children's faces brightened immediately upon hearing Bertine's voice.

"It's the candy ma'am!"

"Perhaps you can call me Miss Bertie instead?"

"Okay, Miss Bertie! We were waiting for our mother to finish her work. But my little sister said she wanted to see her soon, so we walked here."

Two women around her age worked in the restaurant as servers. Bertine realized one of them must be the children's mother. Even so, it was dangerous for them to be out here at this time of night.

Chapter 6: A Place to Belong

BERTINE entered the restaurant again and called out to the proprietress.

“There are two children outside waiting for their mother. I know them and it’s dangerous at this time of night, so I wondered if I might take them home with me if it wouldn’t cause their mother any trouble.”

“Oh, dear. Please wait a moment. Isabella! Your children are here.”

The woman who responded to the name seemed to be around twenty-two or twenty-three years old. She rushed out the door.

“I don’t mind watching over them until you finish your work,” Bertine said. “I believe my house is near yours.”

“Mama, this is the candy ma’am we told you about! She lives in Grandpa Enrique’s old house!”

“O-Oh. That house? Thank you very much for giving my children those candies. David, how many times have I told you that you can’t come to the restaurant?”

The boy named David looked troubled and his little sister, no more than three years old, was already nodding off sleepily.

“I realize you must be worried as this is our first meeting,” Bertine said, “but I really don’t think it wise to leave the children out here to wait for you.”

“Your house is three streets over, yes, the one with the shop on the first floor? Then perhaps I’ll accept your kind offer. I still have so much work left to do, you see. Thank you very much, miss.”

“Of course. We’ll see you soon, then.”

The young mother bowed to Bertine repeatedly as she stepped back inside the restaurant. Their duo had turned into a group of five for the walk home. Evance picked up the little girl and she fell asleep as soon as she was in his arms.

“David, will your father be returning home late as well?” Bertine asked the boy.

“No. He died in the war.”

“I see...”

The latest war had ended with the Southern Federation’s victory, but at a great cost to its people as well. Bertine’s chest ached at the thought of the countless children on both sides who had lost their fathers. Her heart grew heavier when she considered how long the young woman would be raising her children, and by herself at that.

“I was drafted in the war as well,” Evance said. “It was a horrible experience. But our victory meant the return of many of our lands from within the Empire’s grasp. These children’s father, and others too, they all fought and died for that reason.”

Evance didn’t speak again as they continued walking. Bertine almost had the sensation that his sorrow melted into the night air and drifted toward her. She remained quiet as well on the trek back.

“**WE’RE** here, everyone. David, you must be hungry, yes?” Bertine asked.

“Ummm. I am, but I wanna eat dinner with Mama.”

“Then would you like to wait for her upstairs?”

“Yes, please.”

Bertine led the way to the second floor and stepped into the living room. After Evance gently placed the little girl on the couch, David sat down as well. In the kitchen, Bertine prepared a light repast for the boy, enough to sate him but still leave room for dinner with his mother. She spread a bit of jam on a thin slice of bread and poured fruit juice into a glass before taking it all to him.

“Thank you, Evance,” she said. “Your bedroom is on this floor, the one all the way at the end. It’s stuffed with our belongings though, so please make the best of it.”

“My lady, I’ll never forget your generosity for as long as I live...” Evance said.

“Oh, please, enough. I really haven’t done much.”

Bertine waved Evance off to his room with a rueful laugh.

LATER that night, the two siblings’ mother arrived to fetch them. From the looks of her, she had rushed over to the house as soon as

she could. The young mother had considerably brought an offering of sausage from the restaurant with her. Bertine suspected she had paid for the meat out of her own wages. She thanked Bertine profusely, again and again, then took her children home.

After the woman left, Bertine stared intently at the fat-soaked, paper-wrapped sausages.

“Is something the matter, my lady?” Dorothée asked.

“Hm? Oh, I’m just thinking about how she’s experienced life so much more than I have despite being younger than me. She married a man she loved and gave birth to two beautiful children. But her husband died in battle, so now she works to raise her children alone. Moreover, her conscientiousness in bringing this sausage as a thank-you speaks to her character. So I thought to myself how resilient and beautiful her soul must be. And that I need to learn from her example.”

I think your soul is just as resilient and beautiful, my lady, Dorothée thought to herself. Only she was privy to the hardships her lady had experienced, difficulties not even her father and eldest brother Geraldo were aware of. Lately, whenever she thought about them, she’d begun thinking it might not have been the worst thing to remain in this country.

THE next day, Evance assiduously applied himself to various tasks around the property. He painted the walls, waxed the floors, weeded the yards, and pruned the trees.

“Would you like me to lend you some money for your travel expenses home?” Bertine offered. “I have no doubt that someday you’ll repay me when you achieve success.”

Evance declined Bertine’s offer.

“I promised my father I wouldn’t return until I made something of myself.”

It seemed he intended to settle here. She thought that with his build, he would serve well enough as their bodyguard, so Bertine allowed him to live with them. Thus, a new rhythm began in their lives.

Evance handled a variety of odd jobs around the house while disappearing at times during the day, presumably somewhere in the city. He’d told her early on in their cohabitation that he intended to learn how to build buildings in the proper style here. As for Bertine

herself? Well, she devoted herself to preparing a number of products, including embroidered handkerchiefs and cloth bags, as well as handcrafted earrings.

And since that first visit, siblings David and Camilla would stay with Bertine whenever the nights became too lonely for them. Without fail, their mother would express her fervent gratitude with a little something from the restaurant. “A small token,” she would always say. Even if Bertine tried to refuse, Isabella continued gifting her faithfully.

You really don't have to spend your hard-earned coin on me. Despite thinking this every time, Bertine found herself accepting every time. I want to help her as much as I can.

ONE afternoon, someone knocked loudly on the shop's door. Dorothée opened it. After exchanging a few words with the visitor, she turned around and called out.

“My lady, you have a guest.”

Upon hearing those words, Bertine rushed to the door. There she found a serious-looking man waiting for her. She estimated his age at approximately forty.

“Who might you be?”

“My name is José. On His Excellency, Cecilio's orders, I'm searching for Lady Bertine du Jeanne, daughter of Marquess du Jeanne, from the Kingdom of San Luenne.”

While Dorothée watched from a distance, Bertine had a brief conversation with José. He left without entering the house. A grim expression momentarily settled on Bertine's face after she shut the door behind him. But it vanished quickly, as if it had never been there in the first place. She set about working on the day's embroidery.

“There's absolutely no need to fret, Dorothée,” she said. “I told him that his master need not concern himself with us, so we should be fine.”

Dorothée decided not to pry further into the matter if her lady said it was handled.

AT Marquess du Jeanne's residence in the Kingdom of San Luenne,

some time ago.

The five servants finally arrived at their master's house thanks to the arrangements Bertine had made. Upon their return, they informed the marquess of the terrible treatment they'd received at His Excellency's estate, which had prompted Bertine to leave it. They also mentioned her intention to make a life with Dorothée in the Federation thereafter.

Bertine's father read the letter she had penned to him. "*His Excellency would prefer reparations over me. But I will not return to San Luenne.*" Those lines in particular stayed with him.

"How could the Federation have done such an awful thing? What sort of life is she even living surrounded by the enemy? I've made up my mind," her father said. "Though I know I defy the king's wishes, I *will* see my daughter returned to me. And should the national coffers come up short on the reparations owed to the Federation, I swear the House of du Jeanne shall pay it no matter how many years it takes. Summon Diego at once."

Diego, the head of the marquess's private army, hastened to his office. The man would turn forty this year. After hearing his employer's words, he too trembled with fury.

"Diego, please bring Bertine back. Before you depart the Federation, inform Cecilio Bonifaccio that I will bear the responsibility for any deficit in the reparations. He'll get his coin no matter how long it takes me to pay him."

"Understood, my lord. I shall do whatever it takes to bring your daughter home."

Diego immediately set to packing his belongings, intending to leave the marquess's estate that very night. But before he could depart, the lady of the house stopped him in the courtyard.

"Diego, wait," Rose, the marquess's second wife, called him back.

"My lady?"

"My husband is not in his right mind at the moment, so his judgment is terribly clouded. Should you bring Bertine back here, we risk incurring His Majesty's wrath. Then the House of du Jeanne will fall into ruin. Over a hundred people, servants and family members alike, will be turned out with nowhere to go. Do you wish to see this future for yourself as well?"

"But, my lady!"

"Fear not, for I shall ask my elder sister to persuade the king in

my husband's stead. I'll discuss the matter of the reparations with her and find a resolution to this situation. So would you please make yourself scarce for two months or so?"

"But that would mean disobeying my lord's orders!"

A soft smile blossomed on the marchioness's snow-white face. She gripped one of Diego's hands in her own and pressed two large gold coins into it.

"Your daughter is to be married next year, yes? If you are dismissed from your post here, you won't be able to give her the grand send-off a bride deserves. Besides, you must know how much more expensive your lifestyle will become once you have grandchildren as well. Worry not, Diego. I'll be sure to have Bertine brought back once things die down. Trust me. All you have to do is relax for two months in the Empire. Go on now. Remember, your destination is the Empire. When you come back to San Luenne, you are to go to my family home. Do *not* come straight back here after the two months are over."

Diego's expression was pained and his head hung in frustration, but he did as she bid. Once he was out of sight, Rose allowed a faint smile to appear on her pale, ephemeral face before she left the sunroom and headed inside the mansion.

ROSE was the youngest sister of San Luenne's queen. She was of the opinion that she'd never been able to take a breath of her own volition from the moment she was born. For as far back as she could remember, she had always been compared to her outstanding older sisters. At the tender age of sixteen, her parents had married her off to a count more than twenty years her senior.

When the count died of illness, she finally thought she could have her freedom. But her father had other plans for her. "You are to become the chancellor's next wife." And so, she was married off again.

She suspected it had been her elder sister's idea disguised under His Majesty's instruction. After all, the queen had never been one to hesitate to use others for her schemes, not even her own flesh and blood. Rose also didn't doubt that His Majesty had wholeheartedly agreed with the proposal as it would irrevocably bind the chancellor closer to him.

The day she had learned of her second unwanted marriage, she

had almost collapsed from the weight of her despair. Her sister had been living her life as she pleased since becoming queen and attaining the power that came with it. Rose had wondered when she would be able to have a place of her own in this world.

Her second husband, the chancellor, treated her gently and courteously. Not only did he dote on his only daughter, but the man was still deeply in love with his deceased wife. But all that meant for Rose was this was not where she belonged. Despair threatened to drown her once more.

Yet ten years had passed since they wed. She had gritted her teeth and endured her life this past decade, which all in all had not been terrible. Finally, finally, the daughter, who was no blood relation of hers, had been removed as an obstacle toward creating a sanctuary of her own. Even so, her husband was willing to sacrifice his entire fortune to bring her back. Rose would never let this happen.

“I am sorry, Bertine.”

A troubled smile flashed across Rose’s pale, beautiful face as she returned to her chambers.

Chapter 7: The Flower of Krusula

EVEN within the entirety of the Southern Federation, the metropolis of Ybit was especially buoyant on the feeling of victory. The Federation's own people had thought their country, a hodgepodge of tribes and clans, had no chance of winning against the Empire's highly trained soldiers. So, the citizens' joy over the victory was all the sweeter. And it was all due to Cecilio's command. He had thoroughly studied the Empire's battle tactics, devised strategies to counter them, and positioned each tribe in the most optimal locations. Each passing day increased the people's admiration of Cecilio.

He was a handsome thirty-five-year-old bachelor. His looks combined with his position as the de facto head of the Federation meant more and more women coveted him, their eyes greedy with passion and interest. Today as well, Cecilio's secretary, Ignacio, struggled to deal with this particular problem.

"Your Excellency, about the banquet taking place after the conference with the clan patriarchs and tribal chiefs... Might you reconsider and take some time to attend?"

"Banquets are more enjoyable for people without their leaders to dampen the mood."

"It's quite the opposite, sir. We've received a deluge of requests from daughters of many leaders seeking an audience with you."

Cecilio stopped reading the documents before him and raised his head, a strange expression on his face. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Ignacio, but is it not *your* responsibility to politely decline such requests? I have no time to waste on women right now. You should know well enough how busy I am conducting negotiations with the Empire."

"But, Your Excellency, offending the other leaders may cause a great deal of trouble for you..."

Cecilio's blue eyes drilled into Ignacio's.

"I won't deny that it is indeed my role to unite the patriarchs and chiefs. But I have no intention of currying favor with their

daughters to accomplish the task. My only responsibility is to make it clear to them that they risk a great deal of suffering should they choose not to follow me. Nothing more, nothing less. I'll make a brief appearance at the banquet then return here to continue my work once the token formalities are over. That should be enough."

Cecilio ended the conversation, his curtness serving to dismiss Ignacio as well. He had been preoccupied with the communication he'd received last night.

IT had taken two months, but the elusive marquess's daughter had finally been found.

"I've established the young lady's whereabouts, Your Excellency. But she said she does not need your apologies, nor does she intend to meet with you," José had mentioned in his report. She evidently lived in an area on the outskirts of the capital of Ybit with her lady's maid. There, they eked out a living embroidering and selling handkerchiefs and various other accessories.

"She thinks both an apology and meeting are unnecessary, hm?" Cecilio hummed.

He'd assumed the noblewoman would return to her nation immediately, but she acted contrary to his expectations. It seemed she planned on residing here in the Federation. As long as she remained within its borders, it would be difficult for him to claim a lack of reparations. Except the fact was, his country desperately needed capital to recover from the long years of imperial exploitation.

But the people of the southlands despise imperial citizens, which should make it impossible for a Luennian chancellor's daughter to operate a business successfully here. Should she fall on hard times or even die here, it would cause an international incident. Perhaps it might be best if I went to see her myself and convinced her to go home after all.

Cecilio found himself intrigued to meet such a surprisingly spirited noblewoman. He wondered what she would be like in person.

TEN days later, he managed to clear up his busy schedule just a bit

after working tirelessly. He used the free time to visit the marquess's daughter. Right now, he stood in front of a shop in a district located on the farthest eastern edge of Ybit. The area was populated by commoners.

Written in the Federation's alphabet, a sign bore the shop's name in neatly lettered paint. "The Flower of Krusula ~Embroidery and Accessories~" it said. The krusula was a common vine, specifically a creeper, that grew all across the Federation. In times of famine or crop failures, the plant could be dug up and its roots consumed. Despite its remarkable hardness, it sported lovely reddish-purple flowers that bloomed in clusters.

In this nation, it was a common practice to use primary colors on signboards to draw the eye. But this particular plate was different. The letters were small but elegantly painted in the same color as the krusula's flowers on an ivory-white background. While the style of the letters was slanted and flowing, the words were easy to read.

"So she chose a krusula, hm? Meaning she intends to live a strong and resolute life."

Today, Cecilio wore his everyday clothes. A black shirt paired with loose-fitting gray pants worn over low, leather boots. Ignacio had insisted on accompanying him, but he had rejected the offer and rode out on horseback alone.

Just as he was about to step into the shop, he noticed a smaller sign hanging by the entrance. It read, "We offer imperial translation and language instruction services as well."

"Indeed?"

Impressed, he opened the door and found ten people inside the cramped storefront. But not all of them appeared to be customers. Five men and women sat at a table in the back, practicing their pronunciation while reading off their notebooks.

A young woman stood in front of them, leading the class. Her light brown hair was tied back in a ponytail and neat braids at her temple framed her face.

"Adam, don't pronounce the last part. Read it again, but this time, try to make the sound disappear inside your mouth."

"Hena, excellent pronunciation. Keep it up."

"Oh, dear, Milo. You just asked for a live chicken instead of chicken meat."

Cecilio was almost certain that the smiling woman who taught

the class must be the marquess's daughter. She was far from the naive aristocratic maiden he had imagined. The young lady chatted and laughed easily with the residents of this country. She spoke their official language, her impeccable pronunciation practically like a native's. He couldn't even discern a hint of an imperial accent. It was apparent to him that she had adjusted to life here in a relatively short amount of time.

Not wanting to disturb her at work, Cecilio listened attentively while wandering around the small store. He noted the variety of elegantly embroidered accessories: handkerchiefs, woven shoulder bags that women in this country used in their daily lives, and shawls to protect fair skin against the sun's intensity. Since the selection wasn't very large, it would have been more appropriate to describe the interior as an exhibition room rather than a true storefront.

He saw small cards pinned all around with the words, "We can embroider a design of your choosing." The designs on the current wares displayed were in the imperial style, refined and beautifully done. They truly exhibited the preferences of imperial aristocrats.

Because the store was long but narrow, it didn't take Cecilio long to reach the end of its right side. He turned his attention to the left wall and stopped to observe. Myriad types of jewelry adorned it, all arranged neatly. Earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and bangles. What surprised him was their unfamiliar design.

In the Federation, everyone had both ears pierced during infancy. It was a long-held tradition applied to men and women, but most started out with small spherical earrings made of gold or silver. As they grew older, many individuals replaced the studs with decorative ones to be fashionable. The wealthy favored large, gaudy earrings with vivid gemstones and metal plating, one or two in each ear.

However, the earrings in this store were remarkably different in style. One design had an extremely thin wire strung through with small crystals and intricately shaped. Another sported a dangling combination of three or four crystals. In short, the designs came in a variety of colors and patterns.

A few were color-coordinated with complementary colors, while others dramatically mixed dark gems and translucent ones. And all of them had small tags nearby with the name of the artisan who created the piece of jewelry. *These names mark them as people of*

this country. So, she didn't make them herself?

While he scrutinized the display intently, he wondered what to make of this startling development. Before he knew it, the young woman he suspected was Bertine had approached him. She stood a few paces from him and smiled as she watched him survey the products.

"Welcome. Are you in the market for earrings?" she inquired.

"Ah, yes, I am. I find myself surprised by the unusual designs."

Concerned about others listening in on their conversation, Cecilio missed the opportunity to introduce himself. He certainly had no wish to discuss reparations or anything of the sort here.

"All of these earrings were made by women who lost their husbands in the war," she explained. "I provided them with the materials, and they created the designs and products. I only deduct the cost of materials and twenty percent from the sale price. The remainder of the proceeds go to the widows. If you find one you like, perhaps you can gift it to your wife or sweetheart. After all, these earrings bring joy both to the women who made them and the ones who will receive them."

"War widows truly made these...?"

"Indeed. War is deadly not only for soldiers, but the families they leave behind as well. So I'd like to do my part, however small, in helping their widows and children. Especially in light of all the support I received from many people when I opened this shop."

Cecilio was bewildered. It never once crossed his mind that an aristocrat from the Empire could live so cheerfully in his country. And what did she mean by the support she'd received from his fellow citizens? It astounded him to learn not only had she *not* been persecuted but had instead been aided.

A few of her students walked over to them and joined the conversation.

"Sir, this young lady is made of quite stern stuff. Not long after she moved into the neighborhood, she inserted herself into an argument between a husband and wife wherein she protected the woman. 'Insulting and hitting a woman just because she is one is the same as insulting and hitting your own mother! Have you no shame?!' I believe those were the words she shouted furiously at him."

"She did something so dangerous?" Cecilio asked.

"Indeed. The neighbors told her to ignore them since a row

between the two was nothing unusual, but she refused. At that point, they rushed to the couple's house with her because they knew the husband could get violent."

Though Cecilio was aghast by the news, the young lady remained unfazed.

"What can I say except I have nothing to lose anymore. One or two smacks to the cheek defending someone isn't the end of the world for me," she spoke quietly but firmly.

"He hit you then?"

The thought alone agitated Cecilio. Bertine shook her head calmly in response.

"No. The neighbors flew to my rescue just in time and stopped him from doing so. I walked away unscathed thanks to them. I came to this country due to certain circumstances, and my first few days here were frankly difficult. Food and water were in scarce supply. Compared to that awful time, most things aren't so frightening anymore. Besides, thanks to my intervention in the couple's argument, everyone in the neighborhood embraced me as one of their own. So I really can't complain."

Then she happily told him about how her new friends and neighbors had helped spread the word about her shop. One of the individuals in their little group had been staring intently at Cecilio's face throughout the conversation. Halfway through, a startled expression crossed his face, indicating he'd realized who this customer was. Cecilio shook his head almost imperceptibly, silently telling the man not to reveal his true identity.

Chapter 8: Cecilio's Misunderstanding

SAY nothing. The man seemed to understand Cecilio's unspoken command and wisely kept his silence. Relieved, Cecilio changed the subject and told Bertine he wanted to make a purchase.

"Oh, thank you so much!"

She told her students to return to their seats and continue studying, then turned to Cecilio.

"Which one captured your interest?"

"Hmmm. Will you choose ten accessories for me? I leave the selection to your discretion."

"Ten? I certainly will. Thank you!"

"I can also order custom embroidery, yes?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm much obliged. What would you like embroidered?"

"A handkerchief. I'm fine with whatever design you choose so long as it isn't ostentatious."

CECILIO'S purchase ended up being quite substantial. After wrapping the accessories carefully, Bertine handed the collection of items to him and thanked him courteously.

"The women who made all those will be delighted to hear of your purchase," she said. "Your handkerchief will be ready in five days. Shall I deliver it to you?"

"No, I'll return to pick it up. Five days, correct?"

"Yes, it'll be ready then. I look forward to your visit."

Bertine waved Cecilio off happily. A complicated mélange of emotions churned within him as he exited the shop. He exhaled softly once he was outside.

"This is my loss. How could I have possibly told her to return home quickly when she has clearly been working so hard to plant roots in this country? It would have been too cruel of me."

Muttering to himself, he mounted his horse and headed for his manse. He considered her words on the ride. "*Food and water were*

in scarce supply. Compared to that awful time..." His heart ached thinking about the woman who said them because her experience at his estate had been worse than being struck by a man.

Back then, Cecilio hadn't known when he'd be able to return to his home from his visit to the region affected by flooding. But the wait for her must have been absolutely interminable, not knowing when her suffering at the hands of the enemy would end. Perhaps even fearing an endless series of days with even greater pain while he remained away indefinitely. He felt terrible about what she'd endured.

"The handkerchief will be ready in five days, huh?"

As his horse raced back to his estate, Cecilio came to a decision. When he returned to her shop to fetch his order, he would reveal his true identity and offer his deepest apologies for her treatment at his estate.

IN the meantime, Bertine led an increasingly busy life. For her lessons in the imperial language, she accepted both coin and goods as payment. It was no wonder then that most of her students ended up paying for their education with food. Meat, vegetables, and beans. Every day she would receive an assortment of foodstuffs. On rare occasions, live chickens and chicks.

But the southlands were warmer than her homeland, so she couldn't leave them out for too long, or they would rot. Which was why she continued her own education in the kitchen under Dorothee's tutelage. She tried her best despite being a novice at the culinary arts. Though the seasonings changed from day to day, Bertine found herself making hearty soups for the most part, ones chock-full of ingredients. Because she couldn't bear the thought of wasting food by allowing it to rot.

She obviously couldn't tell others, but the truth was that she and Dorothee could survive for a relatively long period of time on the gold and jewelry her father insisted she take with her. All she had to do was sell it off bit by bit. And this was why she accepted barter payments instead of money for her classes. With the result being a happy but troubling issue of an overabundance of food. But they had plenty of neighbors who enjoyed sharing their meals with them, so ultimately the problem took care of itself.

Recently, older people with too much time on their hands and

children whose parents left them at home while they worked stopped by often to eat her soups brimming with a medley of ingredients. Of course, the soup was one reason they came. The other was because they enjoyed friendly gatherings where they could chat with their neighbors and friends. It reached the point where lunchtime at the shop became less “a business selling embroidery and accessories” and more “a restaurant offering meals for free.”

I like it better this way, anyway. Who cares about appearances? Because Bertine could never forget the despair she had felt during her brief stay at His Excellency's residence, knowing she had nowhere to belong. But now she had a safe place here. One she decided in her heart she would protect herself at all costs.

“I can't deny that I'm also still traumatized by Andrew's behavior, or lack thereof, when our engagement ended. Not to mention the debacle with His Excellency, too. So perhaps I'm destined to be alone, unable to pass my days peacefully with a husband,” Bertine lamented to Dorothée.

“My lady, you are in no way responsible for what happened with Lord Andrew,” Dorothée insisted.

“You're right, but in the end, it doesn't really matter. What's done is done. Right then, time for me to start on my embroidery for the day.”

Bertine recalled the black-haired customer from earlier that day and set her mind to work on designing a pattern that would suit him. She had been captivated by his beautiful blue eyes, the color of sapphires.

“Black hair and sapphire eyes, hm...” she hummed to herself.

She opened up a book of illustrations she had brought with her from San Luenne. If memory served, His Excellency Cecilio, the one contracted as her future husband, also had black hair and blue eyes.

“Dorothée, do you think blue-eyed, black-haired men are common in this country?”

“That's a good question, my lady. Let me see. The restaurant owner's husband matches that description, as does the husband of the woman living three buildings away. Oh, and the retiree near her as well. They may not be all that unusual then.”

“I believe you're right, now that you've pointed out these examples.”

Bertine once more turned her attention to the collection of

drawings.

FIVE days later, as promised, the aforementioned man with black hair and blue eyes visited her shop again. This time, he came not long before closing time. Bertine was inside giving a lesson on the imperial language to a man in the prime of his life. They had just finished their lesson, so the man's arrival was the perfect opportunity for her student to take his leave.

"Welcome!" Bertine greeted him warmly, then realized something. *I never asked his name.* "You're here to pick up your order, yes? Um, Mr...?" She politely prompted him for his name and the man obliged.

"My name is Cecilio."

Once he introduced himself, he stared intently at her with his sapphire eyes.

"Right then, Mr. Cecilio, here's the handkerchief you commissioned. Please tell me whether the design is to your liking."

Oh? He has the same name as His Excellency? Bertine was startled to learn this information, but when she took a moment to think about it, she realized the name wasn't that uncommon. Besides, it was unthinkable for the country's leader to come here alone, so surely it couldn't be him. Not to mention she had refused to meet with His Excellency *and* rejected his apology.

The man spread the handkerchief on the counter to inspect her embroidery. It depicted the bald eagle and lion on the Federation's flag standing back-to-back with an upright sword between them. His eyes widened in surprise.

"You stitched our flag's design into this?" he asked.

"Yes, most of it anyway. Though I did make certain to allude to your black hair and sapphire eyes, sir."

He peered closely at the spot she indicated on the handkerchief. "Ah, I see. The lion's mane is black and the bald eagle's eyes are blue."

"Indeed. I wanted to capture your powerful, dignified aura. I do so hope you like it."

"I do. Very much."

"I'm delighted to hear that. Including the handkerchief and the embroidery, the total price is one large silver coin."

"No, you won't see any profit on this sale at that price, not for

five days of work. You're free to go high—" Cecilio was cut off by the sound of the door opening.

"Miss Bertie, I'm home! Ahhh, I'm starving. Oh, many apologies! I didn't realize you still had a customer."

Without even glancing at Cecilio's face, Evance bowed his head in greeting then hastened up to the second floor. Seeing Cecilio's shocked expression, Bertine explained.

"He lives here in lieu of his services as a bodyguard."

"O-Oh, is that so?"

At that, Evance once more came thumping down the stairs and called out to her.

"Miss Bertie! I'm taking a turn in the washroom!"

He didn't come back to the storefront. Instead, he went directly down the hallway at the back of the shop and headed toward the washroom without once appearing in front of them. They heard the door close with a bang. Then came the sound of water splashing and cheerful humming from the washroom. The name of the song was "The Saran River Flows Through My Hometown."

"I apologize for the noise," Bertine said. "He truly is just like a mischievous rascal."

"Hm. Let me pose a question. If an unmarried woman and young man lived in the same house, do you really think anyone would consider them simply housemates?" Cecilio asked in a low, rumbling voice.

"I'm sorry?"

Bertine responded warily, her guard up. She had immediately picked up on the sudden chill in Cecilio's voice.

"I worried deeply about the difficulties you might be facing in the enemy's lands, but I see that my concern was clearly unwarranted."

"Whatever do you mean?" she asked.

"The reason you refuse to return to your homeland is because you've found yourself a paramour, yes? Daughter of the Marquess du Jeanne. I don't judge you for that. It's your life, spend it how you wish. But I was a fool to feel compassion for you when I thought about how hard you strived here because you couldn't return home out of consideration for your father's position."

The man smiled bitterly to himself. That combined with his words finally made Bertine realize this was His Excellency Cecilio

himself, after all. The moment she did, her attitude underwent a complete transformation. She straightened her spine and lifted her chin. Her gaze sharp now, Bertine glared at him.

“Evince truly is just a boarder here, but I’ve been fully prepared for such misunderstandings since the day I took him on. I take it you’re His Excellency Cecilio, yes? The one who commanded me to return as soon as I stepped foot in this country despite my coming here under duress at the behest of my own nation, after my own engagement had ended so I could marry *you*. It’s little wonder then that your servants behaved the way they did. Things make too much sense now.”

“No, well, you see, regarding that matter...”

Cecilio was in a panic. *I’ve done it now. Even though my intention in coming today was to apologize. I should have been more circumspect with my language.*

Bertine stopped his frantic attempt to apologize with an imperious hand and a torrent of angry words. “Let me tell you something, Your Excellency. I was ordered to marry you two weeks before my wedding. I gave up everything and came to this country without a fight. But I never told Ignacio any of that because it was frankly none of his or *your* concern. My engagement broken, married off without my consent to the enemy, and then told to go home as soon as I arrived here. Can you even imagine how I felt? How I worried about my future after being told so bluntly I wasn’t needed by anyone here or at home? So, contrary to your mistaken belief, I don’t choose to remain here because I have a paramour. But perhaps you can enlighten me by answering this question, Your Excellency. How much *more* will I have to pay to be allowed to remain here?”



Chapter 9: Resignation and Hope

BERTINE stared hard back at Cecilio and demanded an answer to her question. He thought of the shortfall in the reparations due to the Federation and suddenly found himself feeling sorry for her.

“The king of San Luenne proposed a reduction in the amount of a thousand large gold coins in lieu of sending you as a bride,” he said. “Of course, I rejected the offer, but I received no reply, and then you came. You must know how shocked I was to find that a king, any king, would be so willing to sacrifice a woman for a reduction in reparations.”

Cecilio continued, his expression sympathetic, “He made a fool not only out of you but me and the Federation as well with this tactic. Regardless, a thousand large gold coins would be impossible for this shop to earn, even if I gave you a century in which to earn the amount.”

Most of the proletariat would never lay eyes on a single large gold coin throughout their lives. A family of four could live comfortably on just one for an entire year. That was its worth.

“A thousand large gold coins...” Bertine repeated.

“Now you understand the depth and severity of the Empire’s exploitation of the Federation through its people’s ignorance. Over many, many years, the Empire robbed our citizens of the rightful price they should have been paid for their resources. Unfair transactions, fraudulent contracts. Unjust methods of ‘borrowing’ land then never returning those plots to their rightful owners. The Kingdom of San Luenne conducted business with the Empire and provided financial support for its armies.”

Bertine could say nothing in response, so Cecilio kept talking.

“I want to restore my country through reparations. I want to build schools and hospitals for my people. But it’s difficult for me to claim there’s a shortfall in the funds because of your presence here. Can you understand my position now?”

The angry burst of energy in Bertine had steadily leached out of her until nothing remained. Because she thought he made a

sound argument.

“Your Excellency, it saddens me tremendously to learn how selfish my homeland had been in all this. I’m sorry for their actions.”

“You’re a victim, so there’s no need for you to apologize. The discourtesy and humiliation inflicted by my servants added to your plight and I take full responsibility for it. I’m sorry. I hope you can forgive me.”

His staff had known nothing of the Empire’s bargaining nor Cecilio’s refusal to accept it, which was why they had been so unpleasantly surprised and infuriated by Bertine’s unexpected arrival. But Cecilio wouldn’t make justifications for them or himself. He only bowed his head deeply in remorse.

“That’s quite enough, Your Excellency. Please raise your head. I understand your perspective completely. Though the prospect of returning to my homeland is a difficult one, I do feel awful about my presence here delaying the plans you have for your country.”

Cecilio decided not to press Bertine any further on the matter.

“I don’t expect you to give me your answer right now. But please do think it over and inform me of your decision as soon as you’re able.”

He departed with those words.

IN her heart, Bertine had resolved to herself that she would grow stronger on her own in this nation. Yet a sense of resignation grew within her at knowing that her existence would only hinder the Federation’s growth. Perhaps she had no choice but to give up on her path.

The moment she thought as much, Evance appeared. Droplets of water trickled from his hair, still wet from his bath. By the troubled look on his face, she surmised he had heard their conversation.

“Miss Bertie, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize my being here would lead to a misunderstanding like this.”

“No, Evance, you’re not to blame. After all, it was my decision to allow you to reside here. Please don’t worry about it. I believe in your potential as an architect, and I want you to fulfill it, truly I do. But I may have to give up on my life here now that I know what a bind His Excellency is in.”

"I want to help you, Miss Bertie. I want to repay you for everything you've done for me. Damned if I can think of how to get you out of this mess, though."

"Thank you. The thought alone is enough for me. I'm sorry as well that I couldn't help you see your dream through to the end."

THE next day.

"Miss Bertie, what's the matter? You're not your usual cheery self."

Adam, one of her students in her imperial language class, stared worriedly at her. He was a peddler in his fifties.

"The truth is, I'll have to close down my shop soon and leave this country."

"What?! But you only just opened it. Why?"

"It's a complicated situation, but the long and short of it is that if I wish to stay here, I must pay the government a thousand large gold coins. And I just *can't* think of a way to come up with so much money. It's impossible."

"A thousand large gold coins..."

Bertine's other students were speechless, stunned by the unbelievably large amount.

"Don't worry though," she said. "I'll continue teaching my imperial language classes as long as I can, right until my departure."

After that, the lesson continued, albeit weighed down by a somber atmosphere. Then Adam interrupted to ask her a question.

"Miss Bertie, last week, didn't you rewrite our farmers' contracts with the imperials in our official language?"

"Are you referring to the wheat farmers' contracts?" she asked.

"Yes, yes. Did the Empire's broker pay full market price for the wheat? I've heard rumors that the Federation's wheat is being bought cheaply because it's easy to bargain us folks down."

"You've heard right, unfortunately. The retail prices charged in the Empire for Federation wheat are high compared to what they're bought for. Which was why I advised the farmers to have their contracts rewritten, so that they receive a fair price for their crop."

Adam clapped his hands in excitement. "Miss Bertie, that means you're generating money for this country! Thanks to you, those farmers were able to do their business without suffering

losses. If you continue doing things like this, that might be proof enough for the government to reconsider your presence here. Because I don't think earning gold coins is the only way to be productive."

Hannah, another student, inserted herself into their conversation. "Once I become fluent in the imperial language, I'll be able to find gainful employment in the Empire. Otherwise, without knowing the tongue, I can only work there as a street sweeper or cleaner. But if I can find a high-paying job there instead, it'll be because of your lessons, Miss Bertie."

"Oh, that's right, Hannah. You plan on emigrating to the Empire for work, don't you?"

"Yes. The end of the war means imperials are open to hiring citizens of the Federation again."

Adam elaborated some more on his idea. "Miss Bertie, what if you become a mediator between the Empire and the Federation's farmers and landowners? You can inspect the contracts for any discrepancies and make sure our people get a fair deal. If you did that, would the government allow you to remain here?"

"He's right, Miss Bertie! What do you think?!"

Hena, the innkeeper, had a curious expression on her face as she listened to the exchange. "What I'd like to know is why Miss Bertie has to pay a large sum like that in the first place."

Bertine hesitated for a moment, then decided to be honest with them because she knew they genuinely cared for her and worried about her.

"I've kept this a secret from everyone for quite a while now, but I'm actually an aristocrat from the Kingdom of San Luenne," she confessed. "I was sent here in exchange for a reduction in reparations owed to the Federation. I kept mum about my situation because I feared no one would come here once they learned the awful truth."

All her students stared at her, momentarily flabbergasted. Then, a moment later, quiet chuckles filtered throughout the space.

"Oh, Miss Bertie, did you truly think we didn't already know?"

"What?"

"Why, rumors sprung up about you as soon as you moved into our neighborhood. That you were an imperial aristocrat and such. Although none of us could have guessed you're actually from San Luenne."

“Rumors? Right away?” Bertine asked, surprised.

“Yes. The fact that you arrived not long after the war ended had everyone speculating that perhaps you’d been forced to leave the Empire for whatever reason.”

Her honesty evidently broke the floodgates as the rest of her students joined in eagerly on the conversation.

“To be frank, it doesn’t matter to us who you are or where you came from. You always look after David and Camilla, not to mention your free soups. You eat the same things in the same places as the rest of us. Your circumstances didn’t matter to us because it was clear to us that you were a good person.”

“He’s right. Not to mention your work with the women who make the accessories here. We’re all aware that you give them eighty percent of the profits. It makes those widows so happy, you know.”

Adam and Hena continued speaking, their expressions kind.

“Above all, Miss Bertie, you don’t look down on us people of the southlands,” Adam said. “Not once have you ever had an unkind word for any of us.”

“Adam’s right again,” Hena agreed. “You’re from a country as rich as San Luenne, but we’ve never heard you complain a single time about your life here.”

Bertine found herself choking with emotions when she realized her new friends and neighbors hadn’t treated her any differently despite suspecting her background. She knew she would be eternally grateful for their generosity of spirit.

“I-I see. You all already knew...” She laughed shakily, hiding the happy tears which threatened to spill over.

“Miss Bertie, we’ll hunt down more people who do business with the Empire, so from now on, won’t you review their contracts? This way, you’ll be able to help the citizens of this country *and* stay here, yes? And there are so many people here who can’t even read or write our official language, never mind speak the imperial tongue. If you can help even a few of those citizens, we would all be overjoyed.”

Up until a short while ago, Bertine had been resigned to the notion of giving up her life in this country. But now she felt a small rush of energy rekindling inside her. The Federation thrived in agriculture, while the Empire thrived in industry. Each side needed the other, but thus far, the imperials had ruthlessly and unilaterally

drained profits from the southlands. Though the Federation had won this latest war, and with it came a return of land to their original owners, there was no meaning in the victory if the contracts continued to be unfair.

“Hmmm. I think you’re on to something,” Bertine said. “After all, the officials here are so busy they couldn’t possibly have the time to look over each individual contract. I’ll discuss the situation with my contact in the government once more.”

“You do that, young lady.”

“Good luck, Miss Bertie.”

Bertine knew what she had to do until His Excellency’s next visit. She would gather as much evidence as she could to persuade him that she would be a useful asset for his country.

NOT long after, the lesson ended and her students went home. She spoke to Dorothée when her former maid approached her quietly.

“Dorothée, I truly love the people of this country. I would like to do what I can to live here, but...I also don’t want to become a burden to His Excellency, not when he’s working so hard for the sake of his people.”

Even so, she ultimately didn’t want to squander her students’ kindness and affection. She was committed to doing whatever it took to eke out a life here.

“I’ll give it my best shot. I can think about giving up and going home once I’ve exhausted every option.” Bertine smiled determinedly at Dorothée so as not to worry her.

Chapter 10: Carlos the Wealthy Farmer

BERTINE'S coach raced swiftly toward her destination—a farmer who grew wheat on a massive scale close to the capital. His plot and output were so sizable that he was known in these parts as the wealthy farmer.

Rocked by the sway of the carriage, she watched the landscape passing by. The scenery in the southlands differed considerably from that found in the island nation of San Luenne, as well as the Empire in the north of the continent. Growing fields and verdant flatlands stretched as far as the eye could see. Wide as a lake, even the river here flowed in a relaxed manner. Trees grew thickly in some parts of the vast, cultivated fields, offering shade to the folks resting from their work in those same plots.

The people of the Federation cherished their traditions and lived their lives while working at an easy pace. In Bertine's eyes, they weren't particularly greedy or materialistic. She thought they didn't show much of a desire to increase their profits either. "If it can be done tomorrow, then there's no need to rush today." She heard this phrase often and it served them well. They were able to embody this tenet and live without starvation thanks to the temperate climate and nutrient-rich soil.

Life in the Empire of Centaur was markedly different in comparison. In the northernmost reaches of that country, winter reigned over half the year in harsh lands. Though the climate near its capital made it a fairly livable locale, the soil there wasn't nearly so fertile. However, the imperial citizens considered hard work a virtue, and their deep hunger for worldly goods, money, and knowledge raised their standard of living significantly over the Empire's long history.

As a result, Bertine had always considered the Empire a powerhouse in the arts, sciences, and culture, particularly as its people continued investing in and developing those facets of their society. In contrast, she used to think of the Federation as a country bound by antiquated values and an outdated way of life. Except

now that she was striving to build a life here in the southlands, she realized how much her upbringing had skewed her views of this country. Over her few months of life in the Federation, she had begun to question the Empire's ways. She had also realized the extent of the people's generosity and compassion. Bertine thought their attitude toward life undeniably virtuous and difficult to achieve.

What she thought she knew about this land was nothing more than a vague image built upon scant information that reached the family of a marquess on a small island nation.

"HOPEFULLY, today is the day he finally agrees to meet with me."

Bertine disembarked from her coach at the enormous gates standing guard at the front of the farmer's residence and strode briskly toward the house. Today would mark her third visit here.

She knocked on the door. His wife answered and called out to her husband.

"Dear, the young woman from yesterday is back."

"Tell her to go home."

Bertine refused to let his repeated refusals and curt behavior deter her. Despite her southern attire, the aura of imperial nobility still clung to her. But she continued to make the trip to see Carlos regardless of his apathy. Yesterday, his wife had finally spoken to her, unable to look on in silence as the young woman stayed focused on her mission. Though she and her son agreed wholeheartedly with Bertine's idea, Carlos remained unmoved.

"Dear, I really do think you should speak to Bertine at least once and hear what she has to say."

"No!"

Carlos had been dealing with brokers from the Empire of Centaur for many years. He didn't want to risk jeopardizing his relationships with them, so he refused to give her the time of day, no matter how much she insisted on procuring a better contract for him if he would just allow her to review his old ones. Her perseverance only made him question why she would willingly work to the detriment of the Empire despite being an imperial herself. Besides, his farm flourished well enough under the current contract, which made Carlos even more aggravated by her nagging.

A few moments later, someone knocked on the door.

“Enter.”

At his reply, he found the blasted woman had stepped inside, a sunny smile on her face.

“How did you get in here?!”

“Your son kindly let me in. Now then, Carlos. I understand that you sell a wagonload of wheat for five large silver coins? And you pay a commission to the broker in addition to that?”

It angered him to learn that his wife and son had told her so much about his dealings.

“That’s right. It’s more than enough for me to make a profit. I see no reason why the likes of you should get involved in my business.”

“Be that as it may, you’re unfortunately taking heavy losses on the contract. The owner of Sirino Farm, your neighbor, accepted my counsel and signed a new contract to sell wheat at eight large silver coins per wagon.”

Carlos didn’t even realize his jaw dropped at the shocking news. “What? He’s selling his crop for such a high price?!”

“Correct. Thirty percent more than your asking price. Without paying a commission either, I might add. The broker’s job is to profit by selling at a higher rate in the Empire, so why the need for *you* to pay a commission in the first place?”

His son stood quietly behind her and stared accusingly at Carlos.

“Carlos, I’m well aware that you’re a very kind landowner who treats his tenants and workers with care and generosity,” Bertine continued. “They would be able to lead even better lives if you made more revenue than you do now. So take advantage of the service I’m offering to you. There is absolutely no need for you to incur such losses by being a puppet for the broker.”

“Why are you doing this?” Carlos asked. “Your motivation baffles me most.”

He sounded deflated, the anger waning. Bertine sensed him weakening and she knew there wouldn’t be a better opportunity to win him over, so she went in for the kill with a smile.

“I’m not an imperial citizen. I was born and raised in San Luenne, but was dragged into the politics between the Federation and my homeland. I do all this because I want to live here, and the only way I can do that is if I pay the government a sum of one

thousand large gold coins.”

“One thou— That’s impossible!”

“Actually, it isn’t. I’ve already saved this country fifty large gold coins from the contract reviews I’ve conducted so far. If I continue at such a pace every week, I can earn a thousand in no time.”

Though his son had been listening silently to their conversation, it seemed he had reached his limit when he interjected.

“Father, have her look over your contract. Don’t you find it maddening that we’re the only ones selling our wheat for so little? You know our wheat is even better quality than Sirino’s, so it doesn’t make sense to sell it for less than what he does.”

“Damn right it is! Our crop is in no way inferior to his.” After his brief outburst, Carlos folded his arms and brooded. He still wasn’t sure whether he could trust this woman. “Tell me. Why do you need to pay such a large sum to our country?”

“The Kingdom of San Luenne was reluctant to pay reparations in full to the Federation. Instead, they used me as a bargaining chip and sent me here as a bride for your leader. But His Excellency had a much greater need for capital than me because of his drive to rebuild this country. Which was why I decided on my own to make up the shortfall of a thousand large gold coins myself since I would very much like to continue living here.”

Carlos’s wife stepped into his study. “Dear, listening to her would benefit us, the workers, and this young lady. Do you truly see a downside to this?”

“Hmm, San Luenne, eh? How can the country treat its own citizens so terribly?”

“Rather than the adage ‘Money is second to life,’ San Luenne lives by another one, ‘Money is as precious as life.’ But the people of the Federation don’t think like this, and that’s why I’ve fallen in love with this country.” Bertine beamed at him.

“Dear.”

“Father.”

“Damn it! Fine! I understand! I’ll show you the blasted contract.”

And so she managed to convince him to accept her proposal. She read through the document, then spoke.

“I knew it. Not only did the broker drive down the price too

low, the commission is much too high as well.”

“You must be joking.”

“The longer one blindly obeys, the faster one will find themselves stripped of everything they hold dear,” Bertine said. “When is the next time your broker will visit?”

“In two months.”

“Understood. I’ll rewrite this contract in the Federation’s official language and make note of all the terms I recommend you amend. Please read it carefully and thoroughly. Once the broker agrees to the new terms, only then should you sign the revised contract, and I cannot stress this enough. Absolutely do *not* sign the contract until the broker agrees to address all your objections. Should the broker refuse to sign the new contract, then I myself will go to the Empire and find a new one for you willing to accept the terms of the revised agreement. I pledge this oath to you.”

Carlos watched Bertine perform the calculations and emphasize the difference between his current contract and the new one. Amazed, he watched his profits soar right before his eyes.

“Young lady, I have a request for you. Would you be willing to help other farmers too? Many of the owners of smaller farms are illiterate, so they agree to verbal contracts and that’s how they do business. My conscience won’t let me rest if I’m the only one who benefits from an arrangement like this.”

“Of course, I’d be glad to. After all, this work is exactly what will allow me to remain in this country.”

AFTER that, Carlos penned a letter of introduction for Bertine, and it proved to be a tremendous boon to her efforts as it gave her the legitimacy she needed. She went from farmer to farmer, each at the referral of the one prior, preventing the Empire from profiting unfairly off the labor of the Federation’s people. At each farm, she reviewed the contracts for free. Thanks in large part to Carlos’s endorsement, in a span of ten days, she reviewed twenty-three contracts, saving the Federation a total of eighty-three large gold coins.

Then, finally, the day arrived for her meeting with Cecilio. He had sent her a notice in advance stating the date and time he would visit, so last night she had prepared all the data she needed for the negotiation today. She had even explained the situation to Carlos

and asked him if he would lend her his support by attending the meeting.

At the sound of a knock on their small shop's door, Bertine and Dorothée rose simultaneously.

Chapter 11: A Shrewd Merchant

BERTINE greeted Cecilio with a smile and led him to the table in her shop where she conducted her language lessons. Carlos, the wealthy farmer, already occupied a seat there.

“Who might this be?” Cecilio questioned her politely.

“His name is Carlos and he runs a wheat farm in the town neighboring Ybit,” Bertine said. “He’ll be assisting me today with my proposal.”

“Your proposal?”

Cecilio looked slightly puzzled and Bertine took that as her cue to cut right to the heart of the matter.

“Your Excellency, if you grant me the time, I guarantee that I can earn this country a sum of one thousand large gold coins.”

“Interesting. On what grounds do you think so?”

“Please take a look at this.”

Bertine then placed a sheaf of documents on the table. Cecilio picked it up and read swiftly through the pages.

“This is a wheat contract, although it has yet to be signed and formalized,” Cecilio said.

Carlos picked up the conversation from there. “Your Excellency, that will be the contract starting this year. Now, please read this.” He handed over a stack of papers to Cecilio. “As I mentioned, Miss Bertine gave you the new contract, one she suggested herself. What I gave to you is the old contract, which I agreed to every year in the past. Please compare the two.”

Cecilio’s eyes widened in surprise as he contrasted the documents. The quality and quantity remained the same across both contracts, but the sum Carlos stood to gain differed vastly between the documents.

“This...the terms in this contract are egregiously bad,” Cecilio said.

“Indeed, they are,” Carlos agreed. “The brokers I’ve dealt with over the years took advantage of the fact that I was ignorant of wheat’s market price in the Empire and as you can see, they

profited greatly as a result.”

Cecilio’s face was drawn with fatigue. “We knew the Empire schemed like this when it came to the mines, so we tried our best to exercise caution in those dealings,” he said. “But I shouldn’t be surprised to learn that they were up to their old tricks with wheat, too. All of the tribal chiefs and clan leaders had been instructed to enforce the minimum price set by the government, but it appears they were unsuccessful.”

“Your Excellency, the regional leaders have never once mentioned anything to us farmers about a minimum price,” Carlos informed him. “It has only been a little over two years since you prevailed over the leaders and united them under your leadership. None of them actually expected the Federation to win the war, so perhaps they feared ruining their relationships with the brokers by following your directive. The truth is, I can understand their positions, because I too was fine with the way things were until this young lady persevered in convincing me otherwise.”

“I see,” Cecilio responded with a strained expression.

Carlos continued speaking. “Sir, Miss Bertine’s efforts don’t benefit my farm alone. Just like with my contract, she has reexamined many other farmers’ agreements as well. Those in my area, those who I referred her to, and others *they* referred her to. Thanks to her, we have high hopes that we’ll no longer be robbed of our rightful profits.”

“My counsel to these farmers has resulted in saving the Federation eighty-three pieces of large gold coins from a total of twenty-three contracts,” Bertine stated.

The information left Cecilio momentarily speechless. He couldn’t contain the surprise in his voice when he recovered his faculties. “That much since last we met? You mean to tell me you stopped the flow of that much revenue to the Empire in just ten days?”

“Correct,” Bertine asserted. “Though the eighty-three pieces won’t end up directly in the country’s coffers, they will circulate here in other ways, thereby enriching the Federation.”

Cecilio stared at them both for some time, reflecting on the situation. Bertine looked proud of herself and Carlos grinned cheerfully. With a wry laugh, Cecilio conceded defeat.

“Lady du Jeanne, you have made your point. Well done. I applaud your skill.”

"I realize that eighty-three is nowhere close to a thousand pieces, but won't you grant me the time to reach that goal through my work? And once I do, might I continue living in this nation?"

Strength radiated in her eyes and voice.

"I won't deny this is one method of protecting our country's fortunes," Cecilio said. "Then, I would like you to accept a request of mine. It might lead to an even more substantial stream of income. If you successfully accomplish the task I set for you, I'll forgive the thousand-coin shortfall entirely."

Bertine's expression turned serious at once.

"What is it?"

"I'd like to send officials right away across the country to verify the lowest contracted price, but we unfortunately lack the manpower. The individuals who can handle this duty have their hands full dealing with the war's aftermath. And the ones proficient in the imperial tongue are already drowning in more work than they can handle, so we're in a difficult position."

Bertine recalled how very few imperial citizens, particularly the aristocracy, actually spoke the Federation's official language. In the same vein, not many people here could read or write in the imperial language. Essentially, the only ones who could bridge the divide between the nations were the merchants capable of utilizing both languages.

"Which is why I'd like *you* to help us verify the wheat sales contracts," Cecilio said. "I'll find a way to secure five officials to dedicate to this operation. The six of you will divide the burden equally and visit all of the regional leaders. You'll confirm the wheat sale price in each territory and enforce the minimum price I set. Will you help me do this?"

"Are you certain I even can?" Bertine asked.

Cecilio nodded emphatically. "Yes, I am. Go persuade the various chiefs and clan heads to sell their wheat for at least seven large silver coins per wagon. Of course, you'll be paid a daily stipend for your work."

"Yes. Yes, yes, yes!" Bertine exclaimed. "It would be my pleasure. This is an opportunity for me to show you the negotiation skills I've tempered in myself since the moment I learned to speak."

Cecilio smiled broadly and nodded again, pleased by her attitude. "I expect great things from you. Would one large silver coin per day suffice for your allowance? I'll pay for your

transportation, lodging, and meal expenses separately.”

“I gladly accept the offer, Your Excellency. And I won’t be stopping at wheat either,” she insisted. “No matter how long it takes, I’ll strive at this work until I’ve earned this country a thousand large gold coins.”

Carlos smiled happily and interrupted them. “I expected no less from a San Luennian. To extract a concession from His Excellency himself truly attests to your people’s vaunted tenacity. You will always find a way to rise after every fall, hm?”

“I hope you meant that as a compliment in this case, Carlos,” Bertine said.

Carlos and Cecilio both chuckled, charmed by her serious expression.

“Oh, dear. Why are you laughing? I don’t understand.” She found herself blushing in response, perplexed by their reactions.

Now that their discussion was over, Carlos stood up.

“Thank you very much for your help today, Carlos,” Bertine said.

“Think nothing of it. I still have work to do at the farm, so it’s time I get back.”

He left with a smile. Which meant Bertine was now alone with Cecilio. *I need to say something.* But she didn’t know what to talk about. Cecilio seemed to sense her flailing internally because he kindly took the initiative.

“If you hadn’t realized what was happening, we would have continued bleeding money to the Empire,” he said. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Oh, no, not at all. I actually have my students to thank for this idea.”

“Is that so? Although ultimately, *you* were the one who started the language classes.”

“Your Excellency, I have a grand plan in mind for my life in this country, and this marks the first step on that journey. You may proffer your thanks afterward.”

Her words stopped Cecilio just as he was about to take a sip of tea.

“Grand plan, you say? Please, do tell.”

“It’s still too early for me to discuss in detail. But suffice it to say, I anticipate it turning the tides in the Federation’s favor. Instead of being bled dry by the Empire, its citizens will spend loads

of money here and happily at that. I hope I've piqued your interest. My immediate goal is to become someone necessary to this country."

His blue eyes pierced Bertine as he watched her. "Fascinating. Be sure to reach out to me once you're ready to put this grand plan into motion. I'll help you as long as it's within my power."

"Thank you! I certainly will then."

CECILIO bought many accessories on this occasion as well before he departed.

"My lady, that went well."

"Indeed, it did. Even better than I had hoped. I'll be busy again tomorrow poring over contracts, but tonight, why don't we celebrate by eating dinner at our favorite restaurant?"

"It would be my pleasure to accompany you."

AS he rode his horse back to his estate, Cecilio found himself feeling both pleased and frustrated. Pleased and surprised because Lady Bertine turned out to be far more talented than he could have ever imagined. Frustrated and embittered because he learned the other leaders of this country still didn't trust him. Still, he allowed himself a small measure of cautious optimism over the new operation. He hoped that her efforts, combined with the officials he would dispatch, would be enough to prevent further monetary losses on Federation wheat by the time harvest season arrived.

"I'm glad she noticed the problem early, while we have the chance to remedy it."

Her green eyes really are beautiful, he thought to himself. How fiercely they burned when she glared in anger. How they narrowed when she laughed in delight. How they widened in surprise. How they radiated her earnestness when she confidently conveyed her opinions.

The women of this country weren't particularly assertive with men. It might be different for them after months and years of marriage, but on the whole, unmarried women were often reserved in their attitude toward men, keeping them at a distance.

So Bertine's unexpectedly strong will surprised Cecilio. He

surmised her unfettered and privileged upbringing as the daughter of a marquess, who also happened to be a chancellor, had a great deal to do with her indomitable nature.

“The shrewd merchant I saw is far from being a naive, sheltered noblewoman.”

Cecilio laughed then his face tightened as he mentally started drafting the text for the documents he would have the six use on this operation.

Chapter 12: Julie, a Servant of the Marquess

AT fifteen years old, Julie was a domestic servant on the Marquess du Jeanne's staff. Today, she visited the business district to shop for the staff as part of her weekly ritual. She bought sewing thread, a variety of buttons for all manner of staff uniforms, and sweet, inexpensive candies her fellow staff members had requested.

Just as Julie was about to make her way back to the marquess's estate, someone dragged her into a back alley so abruptly she feared she was the target of an abduction. Her arms and legs shook in terror, but still, she valiantly tried to fight off her would-be attacker. Then, a whisper in her ear.

"Julie, it's me. I've been waiting so long for you to come."

The man showed her his face quickly.

"Huh?! M-Mr. Diego? But how is this possible? Aren't you supposed to be in the Federation?"

"Please, over here. I have something important to tell you."

He pulled her deeper down the alley, into a deserted tavern.

"Mr. Diego, why are you doing this?!" she cried.

"Julie, listen to me. This is important, and it concerns Lady Bertine."

Utterly confused, Julie nevertheless nodded her understanding and prompted him to continue.

"I didn't go to the Federation. The marchioness stopped me from taking the trip there despite the marquess's order to rescue my lady."

"The marchioness did? But why?"

"She told me not to go to the Federation, gave me money to while away two months in the Empire."

"But why would she do such a thing..."

"I think she doesn't want Lady Bertine back in San Luenne."

Upon hearing those words, Julie immediately remembered something Dorothée had always told her and the other servants: *"Should you ever see the marchioness and Lady Bertine together alone, inform me right away."*

Dorothée's request had sparked a flurry of gossip amongst the staff because the marchioness was a quiet woman who always treated them and the marquess's daughter with kindness. Julie had even wondered why Dorothée would say such a thing in the first place. The only conclusion she'd been able to reach was that Lady Bertine's lady's maid must hate the current marchioness out of love for the first marchioness.

"I think now I understand why Miss Dorothée was always so wary of the marchioness. That must be why she warned us," Julie said.

"What are you saying, Julie? Did the marchioness do something to Lady Bertine?"

"I don't know. But Dorothée used to repeatedly remind us to tell her if any of us ever saw the two of them alone together."

"Damn it, why didn't Dorothée tell me her suspicions? Never mind. Julie, listen and listen carefully."

She stared up at Diego seriously.

"I want you to tell my lord everything I'm about to tell you now. I can't return to the estate, so you have to pass on the message for me."

"But I'm just a domestic servant. I'm not allowed to enter my lord's room."

"You don't need to. When night falls, and the light in the marchioness's bedroom goes out, go outside and knock on the window of the master's study. You *must* do it from the outside, you understand?"

Julie started shaking. "Mr. Diego, I'm scared."

"Good, be scared because this is for Lady Bertine's sake. Under no conditions should you reveal this to the other servants. I have no idea who's loyal to the marchioness."

"Right, good point."

"We need to inform the marquess of what his wife is doing. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes. Yes, I do. I'll try my best. I have to, for Lady Bertine."

Diego kept an anxious eye on the street outside through the window.

"Listen, all right? The marchioness is the queen's younger sister. I don't know if this incident was just her doing or if the queen is involved as well. If the royal family is part of this, I have to remain in hiding so they don't find out. Otherwise, we'll end up

dragging my lord into this mess as well.”

“Truly? I still don’t really understand any of this, but I’ll do my best.”

“Tell everything I just told you to the marquess. And tell him I’ll be here tomorrow as well, at the same time.”

Diego made her repeat everything before he slipped out of the tavern and disappeared. Julie returned to the marquess’s estate, her heart pounding madly in her chest the whole time and sweat making her palms slick. But she was determined to carry out her mission. Because Lady Bertine was her savior.

FIVE years ago.

Julie was ten years old and she had only recently been taken on as a maidservant in the Marquess du Jeanne’s household. One day, a silver spoon had mysteriously disappeared and thrown the staff into an uproar. Julie had been the prime suspect because she’d been observed wandering in and out of the kitchen constantly. Yet she had only done so since she was still learning her responsibilities.

“I’ve never even touched a silver spoon!”

Julie’s cry of dismay only deepened the other servants’ suspicion of her. *They’ll think I’m a criminal now.* Her mind went blank with fear. At that moment, Bertine happened to hear the commotion by coincidence because she’d been searching for Dorothee to help her with something.

“Suspecting someone should be the absolute last resort in a situation like this,” she said. “Isn’t it more likely that the spoon fell somewhere? I’ll help as well, so let’s conduct a more stringent search.”

The hunt for the missing spoon commenced again at Lady Bertine’s urging. And this time, it was successful when the spoon turned up amongst the food waste tossed in the rubbish hole dug in the garden. One of the cooks realized they must have accidentally dropped the spoon along with the waste. It was fortunate the rubbish hadn’t yet been taken away. Thus, Julie was cleared of suspicion and the cook apologized profusely for the mistake.

Lady Bertine had noticed the fearful tremors that continued to wrack Julie’s body even after the situation was resolved. She summoned the young girl to her room, where she gave her

something special. It was a sweet baked confection of the highest quality.

"I'm so sorry," Bertine apologized to *her*. "If I had just noticed earlier, I could have spared you from such a frightening experience."

"It's not your fault, my lady."

Saying those words broke the dam of tears Julie had been holding back.

"You're all right, my dear, you're all right. Oh, you poor thing. If anything troubles you again, feel free to come to me, hm? Everyone makes mistakes, but it's an awful feeling to be doubted like that, especially without proof. I think everyone was just in a panic. Regardless, I'll tell them to be more careful in the future."

Bertine wrapped her arms around Julie's shoulders and comforted her.

Later that day, Julie stealthily devoured the treat when she had a moment alone. Sweet and emanating a rich, buttery aroma, it tasted decadently delicious, a flavor she'd never experienced before. After that incident, Bertine continued to engage Julie in conversation, asking about her well-being and such. She would often hand her small candies and confections, too.

"How could the marchioness have stopped Diego from rescuing Lady Bertine?! And to tell him to enjoy a vacance in the Empire of all things!"

Julie suddenly found herself terrified of the mistress, who always spoke so gently and softly.

THAT night, Julie quietly snuck out of her bed. Just as she was about to open the door and slip out in the corridor, her coworker sharing this room with her called out.

"Julie? What's wrong?"

"I-I'm thirsty. And I need to use the privy. My stomach hurts for some reason."

"Oh, all right. Do take care."

"Thank you."

Once she exited her room, Julie practically ran to the sunroom then gently opened the glass door that led outside. She walked in the direction of the marquess's study. The thick curtains were drawn, but she tapped on the glass window anyway using the tips

of her fingers.

Thrice, four times. Julie felt herself panicking when the curtains remained steadfastly closed. She was debating with herself on whether or not she should knock more loudly when the curtains finally pulled apart just a bit, followed by the window being opened the slightest sliver. The marquess peered out at her.

“My lord.”

“Remind me who you are again.”

“Julie. I’m a maidservant. I have a message from Mr. Diego, my lord.”

Both the curtains and window suddenly opened wide.

“Diego? What’s the meaning of this?”

She relayed to him everything Diego had told her. Though the marquess remained expressionless while he listened, his fingers gripped the windowsill so tightly they turned white.

“Understood. Diego will be there tomorrow. Thank you, Julie. You did well. I’ll reward you later. Now, go back to your room right away. We’ll have trouble on our hands if someone sees you.”

With that, the marquess closed the window and quickly drew the curtains shut once more. Julie hurried back to the sunroom. Before she went inside, she wiped off the dirt clinging to her slippers. She opened the door and traversed the same path back to her room. Even though it wasn’t cold, she couldn’t stop trembling.

THE next day. Elias, a young man in the marquess’s private army, was in the back alley tavern.

“Diego, my lord once more asks that you go to the Federation and this time, I shall accompany you.”

“I see. You do know the royal family might be involved in this situation? Are you sure you want to be a party to it, considering you’re nobility?”

A bold smile lit up Elias’s handsome face.

“I’m merely a baron’s fourth son. Should something happen that could jeopardize my family’s reputation, I’ll have my father disown me before anyone can even lob their censure at me. More importantly, I can’t forgive the marchioness for instructing you not to rescue Lady Bertine. I’ll go with you to help her.”

“Understood. I’ve already secured passage on a ship bound for the continent. The first thing we must do after we arrive is locate

her.”

The two men boarded the ship and sailed to the mainland. Upon arrival in the Federation, they procured horses for themselves and headed toward the capital of Ybit. They raced on horseback and as soon as they arrived in Ybit, they requested an audience with Cecilio, the Federation’s leader.

INSIDE Cecilio’s office in Ybit.

“I’m sorry to be the bearer of bad news, especially because you have traveled such a far distance, but Lady du Jeanne is currently on her way to the innermost region of the Federation. At my behest, of course. A bodyguard and her maid accompany her. Now, I’d like to tell you the particulars of how we reached this point.”

Faced by the two grim-faced men, Cecilio explained the situation to the best of his ability. Diego and Elias were the ones who ended up surprised by his tale.

“Your Excellency, you refused to marry Lady Bertine?” Elias asked.

“I did. I sent my rejection via a messenger, who returned with a letter confirming receipt of my notice. Yet she still came to this country under the impression she was to wed me. After that, I received no communications whatsoever from San Luenne’s royal family.”

Cecilio then presented to them the paper his messenger had been handed. “This certifies receipt of documents sent by His Excellency Cecilio.” Along with those words, it had the date noted as well—three days before Bertine boarded the ship departing the Kingdom.

“Captain, it appears the royal family knew His Excellency refused the match, but they forced Lady Bertine to leave regardless,” Diego said.

“You’re right,” Elias nodded, a grave look on his face.

“I take it the situation is fraught between your chancellor and royal family?” Cecilio assumed.

“That’s not for me to judge,” Diego said. “For now, we’ll follow our lady’s trail. Would you tell us her destination?”

“Understood. Allow me to draft official identification documents for you both. It should make your journey much

smoother.”

They thanked Cecilio for his assistance and, without resting, set out at once after Bertine, who was on her way to the deepest reaches of the Federation.

“Captain, His Excellency wasn’t quite the savage the rumors depicted him as,” Diego remarked.

“Indeed,” Elias agreed. “He was very reasonable, even going so far as to create those documents without us asking.”

Now we must fulfill the marquess’s command. Diego urged his horse to go faster.

Chapter 13: Racing into the Federation's Hinterlands

A few days before the marquess's private soldiers met with Cecilio.

Bertine and the five civil servants dispatched on the operation gathered around a table, staring at the map spread open on it.

"Lady du Jeanne, do you have a preference for the region in which you wish to work?"

"No, not particularly, since I've never been to any of them. But if there's somewhere none of you are comfortable visiting, I'd be happy to take it on myself. After all, I must do my best to produce strong results."

As it happened, the officials did in fact have a territory they weren't keen on managing. A place known as the Federation's "hinterlands." Located far south of the country's center, it was partitioned amongst seven different tribes. And within the seven heads who led each one, there was one especially obstinate man who clung to the traditions of the past. He was in charge of the Bilva district.

The civil servants exchanged glances with each other, trying to decide how to approach the subject. The unspoken leader of the group wavered between conflicting desires. On the one hand, Lady du Jeanne herself had asked to be assigned to whichever region the other five didn't want. On the other, they would all be in trouble if they failed to carry out His Excellency's directive if she ended up unable to convince the leaders there.

"The tribal chiefs in the hinterlands are exceptionally stubborn, my lady. I foresee your experience with them being extremely difficult because you're a foreigner."

"I understand and thank you for your counsel," she responded. "I choose the hinterlands. Oh, and please do call me Bertine."

"If you're absolutely certain... Then we leave that region in your hands. But please contact me if you run into trouble in the hinterlands since I'll be handling the chiefs in the neighboring region to the east. Each of us will depart tomorrow for our

respective destinations. Bertine, will you require an escort?"

"No. I know someone who would be perfect for the role, so there's no need for you to make any arrangements. Thank you, though."

THE second floor of Bertine's shop, Krusula.

"What? Me? You want *me* to accompany you to the hinterlands?"

"Oh, dear, are you unable to, Evance?" Bertine asked. "Should I hire a professional guard, after all?"

"No, I can do it. The firm will grant me time off from my duties as an assistant as well, so that shouldn't be an issue. Not to mention, it would be a waste of good money to hire a guard. I'll join you. But..."

Evance ruminated in silence for a few moments before confessing the truth to her.

"I'm actually from the Bilva district. Do you remember what I told you of the promise I made to my father? That 'I won't return until I make something of myself'? Well, I said that to him rather angrily since we'd been arguing over my chosen path. Which is why I'm reluctant to go back so soon, considering I haven't exactly accomplished my goal."

"But isn't the Bilva district quite large?" Bertine asked. "I hardly think we'll run into your father, no?"

"Ahhh. Hm. Perhaps you're right."

Bertine shook off Evance's uncertainty and firmly accepted his role as her escort. The next day, the two of them, along with Dorothee, departed for the hinterlands.

Of all the places for her to be assigned, it had to be the hinterlands. She'll have her work cut out for her trying to convince the chiefs. But Evance didn't voice any of his thoughts, instead choosing to keep his worries to himself.

THEY experienced no troubles on their journey in the carriage and tomorrow, they would finally arrive in the Bilva district of the hinterlands. The mystery surrounding the most stubborn leader of the region only fanned Bertine's motivation to succeed. In contrast

to her eagerness, Evance appeared decidedly unenthused by the situation.

"Evance, whatever is the matter?" Bertine asked. "I really don't think you have anything to worry about since we won't be traveling to your home."

"Bertie, I don't think there's any point concealing this any longer, so I'll come right out and say it," Evance said. "You're wrong about not traveling to my home. Because my father is the leader overseeing the Bilva district."

"I... What?"

"You heard correctly. My father is the chief in charge of Bilva..."

"I think...this works in our favor, actually. You'll be able to help me convince him."

Evance responded by digging his fingers into his skull and groaning in despair. "With my luck, the opposite will happen. I renounced my claim as his heir, the next chief, and fled to the capital, you see. If I return now without any significant feats to my name, I can guarantee you he *won't* be pleased to see me. So it might be best for me to wait for you somewhere near my home and find other ways to spend my time. Would that be all right with you? I can sleep in the carriage at night."

Bertine smiled ruefully at her large companion's timid suggestion and apprehensive expression. "I won't force you to go with me because it's clear you hate the idea. Then where will you wait for me while I speak to your father?"

"Do you see that enormous zelkova tree up ahead? That's where I'll be, underneath its bower."

"Understood."

After Evance disembarked at the tree, Bertine proceeded to his family home without him. But she faced another problem when she reached it.

"My husband, Bruno, is currently resting. May I ask what business you have with him?" A woman, most likely Evance's mother, answered the door with a troubled look.

"I come bearing a letter from His Excellency Cecilio," Bertine said. "He wishes for this country's wheat to be sold at a price of at least seven large silver coins per wagon."

"Oh...I see. Please wait a moment."

The woman went back inside the house and reappeared again

after a short while.

“Please, come in.”

She led Bertine to her husband’s room, where Bertine found the leader of the Bilva district lying in bed.

“I am Bruno, clan chief responsible for the Bilva district. Where are you from? You’re clearly not a citizen of the Federation. And you’re a woman to boot. Why did His Excellency send someone like you with his message?”

Those were the first words out of Bruno’s mouth as he scrutinized Bertine with sharp eyes under thick, bushy brows. For an instant, she felt intimidated by his overwhelming aura. Then she suppressed the feeling by disguising it with a smile.

“Well met. My name is Bertine, and I migrated to the Federation from the Kingdom of San Luenne. I came here today on behalf of His Excellency to verify the details of your wheat contract with the Empire. Specifically, my job is to confirm that the sale price of wheat hasn’t fallen below the minimum prescribed by him.”

Bruno’s face contorted in displeasure at her response. “The gall of the man! To send someone from the parasite that is the Kingdom *here*, to the hinterlands of all places, to do his dirty work. What in tarnation is His Excellency thinking? He makes a mockery not only of the hinterlands but Bilva as well!”

The last few words ended in a shout. But immediately after, he groaned in pain.

“Darling, you know you shouldn’t raise your voice. It hurts, doesn’t it?”

“Begging your pardon, but are you ill?” Bertine asked. “If so, then I’d be more than happy to speak with your proxy, Lord Bruno...”

“I only hurt my back a little! I’m not sick!” he barked back at her. “Sleep is all I need to recover!”

It’s clear fits of anger only worsen the pain, so why does he insist on repeating his foolishness? Of course, Bertine wisely remained silent and decided to humor him.

“Ah, I see, an injury? Then please, lie down and listen to me,” she suggested. “His Excellency is concerned that too much money from our country is still flowing into the hands of the Empire through low wheat prices. Despite winning the war, such a situation continuing would only serve to hinder the Federation’s restoration.”

“Then what’s his logic in sending you?”

Bertine wasn't sure how much she should tell him, so she chose her words carefully. "He has two reasons. One, I'm fluent in both the imperial tongue as well as the Federation's official language and at present, the government is understaffed on personnel with the same ability. The second is a bit more personal. I love this country, but in order to remain here, I need to prove I can be useful to the Federation. Now, I realize I'm changing the subject, but Lord Bruno, you're Evance's father, aren't you?"

Evance's name induced a dramatic reaction in him.

"Do you know him?!"

"I do. He's accompanied me on my journey and waits not far from here because of his fateful promise to you. 'I won't return until I make something of myself,' I believe it was."

"Darling, please. I beg you to forgive him already. Let him live his own life." His wife clung to him, sad but fierce as she beseeched him.

"Where?! Where is he?!" Bruno roared.

"Shall I summon him then?" Bertine asked.

"Please! I must apologize to him! I must!"

"Right away, my lord."

Bertine rushed out to where Evance awaited her. Once she arrived at the location, Bertine found him napping in the shade of the enormous tree.

"What? I told you I don't want to see him," he grumbled.

"Your father is bedridden because of an injury."

Upon hearing the news, he jerked upright and jumped into the carriage with her. It didn't take long for them to return to Evance's family home.

"Father! What happened?! How did you hurt yourself?!"

"Evance! My boy, it's so good to see you hale and hearty! It was wrong of me to tell you to leave without listening to what you had to say. Have you any idea of my worry and fear for you, especially with such a small sum of coins? My wound is nothing. All I need is a good night's rest to heal. Just knowing that you're alive, I..."

Bertine couldn't help smiling in amusement at father and son's loud, passionate exchange. Evance told his parents about being robbed by a thief in Ybit and how Bertine came to his rescue. After hearing his tale, Bruno's attitude changed completely.

"Thank you for looking after my son. I'm ashamed of my

earlier behavior now. If your duty is to enforce the minimum price for wheat, then I shall help you by following His Excellency's edict. It's the least I can do for you aiding my feeble son."

"Feeble...? I...never mind, it's nothing. In any case, thank you very much! You've done me a great favor," Bertine said.

Up until now, Bruno had done as the broker instructed and sold his wheat for five large silver coins per wagon. But henceforth, he agreed to increase the price to seven. He made an additional promise to inform the other six chiefs of the hinterlands about this issue.

"So there is no need for you to meet them yourself," he told her. "You can relax here while waiting for their answers."

Bertine hesitated because she didn't want to shirk her responsibility. When he saw her uncertainty, Bruno explained his reasoning.

"The people around here hold particularly tightly to tradition. 'Help our people once and we will return the favor twice.' It's an old custom in these lands. You fed my feeble son though he had not a coin to his name. You allowed him a place in your home and provided for him. So please let me return the favor to you twice over."

"No, really, you're exaggerating..." Bertine protested.

But why do you keep calling him feeble...? That baffled her more than anything else.

TRUE to his word, Bruno immediately dispatched six messengers to the other chiefs in the hinterlands. Their responsibility was to make sure they received the leaders' assent to abide by His Excellency's edict.

"Then would it be all right if I took a tour of the nearby area until we receive the other chiefs' responses?" Bertine asked. "This is my first visit to the region, so I'm quite looking forward to taking in the sights."

Bruno's wife, Cassandra, and Evance agreed to be her guides.

"Thank you so much. Lead the way whenever you're ready."

Shortly thereafter, they left the house to explore the surrounding area. And when they did, Bertine discovered even more aspects to love about this country.

Chapter 14: Paradise

BERTINE, Dorothée, and Cassandra chatted cheerfully in the open carriage Evance drove.

“Frankly speaking, his father and I were in absolute fits of terror and sorrow wondering if Evance lay collapsed in some far-off place,” Cassandra said. “We never could have imagined he would be saved by a young lady such as yourself.”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t go so far as to say I saved him,” Bertine insisted. “If anything, he’s saved us by acting as our live-in bodyguard.”

“Mother, I have every intention of succeeding as an architect so that I can repay my debt to Bertie,” Evance said.

Cassandra frowned at her son. “An *architect*. Then you really mean to forsake becoming the next chief?”

“I do. Why should I automatically become the chief just because I was born first? Camillo is far better suited to the position than I could ever be. I’ve said as much over and over again in the past. *He* should become the next chief, for the sake of everyone in the Bilva district. In the meantime, I’ll do my best in the world beyond here.”

Tears pooled in Cassandra’s eyes. “Evance, what if you become ill again?”

“Excuse me for interrupting,” Bertine interjected, “but your husband also referred to him as feeble, which doesn’t fit what I know of Evance.”

“Well, the truth is, I was quite a sickly child until the age of fifteen or so,” Evance said. “The constant bouts of illness made me reed-thin too.”

Bertine couldn’t imagine him like that at all, not when he was so large and strong now.

“I can tell you don’t believe me, but it’s true,” he said. “Around my seventeenth or eighteenth year, everything changed when I suddenly grew into the implausibly healthy body I have now. Before then, I would be on the verge of death from one thing or

another almost every year of my life, so Mother and Father still have a hard time seeing me as anything other than the sickly child I used to be."

"Of course, we did," Cassandra said. "Do you have any idea how many times we begged God not to take you from us? To take us instead? Silly boy."

Listening to mother and son talk reminded Bertine of her own mother, who had passed away years ago. As far back as she could remember, her mother had often been bedridden because of her weak constitution. Bertine had loved snuggling into her bed and having her head patted by her.

"Evan, my mother died when I was young, so frankly, I'm envious that you have such loving parents concerned over your well-being," she said. "At the very least, I think you should write letters to them regularly after we return to Ybit."

"You know, Bertie, you're right. I'll do just that."

While they talked, an orchard further ahead came into sight.

"Besides wheat, we grow fruit trees as well," Cassandra said. "We have a variety of fruits here, so pick as many as you'd like, all right?"

"Thank you! I won't hold back then."

Bertine gladly accepted Cassandra's offer as they stepped down from the coach. When she did, the first fruit tree she saw astonished her. Boasting long, thick leaves growing lushly in its branches, it stood two meters tall in all its green glory. Bristly, green egg-shaped fruits hung all throughout its branches.

"What is this?" Bertine asked.

"We call this fruit dragon's egg. You break it open like this, right down the middle, and use a spoon to eat the flesh."

Cassandra took out a small knife from her pocket and split the round, green fruit into two perfect halves with a snap. The flesh inside was pure white and speckled by many tiny black seeds. Using the knife, she skillfully scooped out a portion of the fruitmeat and offered it to Bertine. Thanking the other woman, Bertine popped the morsel into her mouth. Its flavor surprised her.

"What is this?! It melts so wonderfully in the mouth. I love how refreshingly sweet it is, not to mention the lovely flowery aroma. And the tiny black seeds just pop when I chew. It's fun to eat *and* delicious."

"Isn't it? The soil here seems to be perfect for this particular

variety because it grows plentifully without much labor on our part. But the fruit itself bruises easily, so it needs to be consumed soon after it's picked."

"Fascinating. No wonder I've never seen this until now."

Bertine took her time finishing the dragon's egg in her palm. It was so refreshingly delicious, she could devour mountains of it.

"This is a star fruit." Cassandra introduced another one of their fruits.

"What an interesting shape."

The long, oval, yellow-green fruit had several ridges running down all around it. When cut into round slices, it revealed the yellow star-shaped flesh inside.

"Oh, it's sweet and sour," Bertine mused. "The stickiness leaves a fresh aftertaste."

"It's quite popular as well and can be used to make spirits."

"Bertie, it's so delicious and hardly leaves you with an aching head the next day. Why don't we drink some tonight?"

"That sounds lovely, Evance."

Evance and Cassandra showed her even more fruits after that one. There was a fruit covered in thick fuzz that concealed creamy, jiggling white flesh and exuded a wonderful scent. Another closely resembled grapes, but its skin was edible with brilliantly scarlet flesh inside. Bertine gorged herself on a myriad of fruits she'd never seen or tasted before now.

"None of these can be exported to the Empire?" she asked.

"They're all best eaten when perfectly ripened. Otherwise, they're too sour when overripe and bitter when under. But they don't keep very long once they *are* fully ripe, and as I mentioned earlier, they bruise easily too, so it's impossible to transport them far distances."

"Ack, how vexing. I can't even imagine how much foreign currency would flow into the Federation if even one of these fruits could be sold abroad."

Evance and Cassandra glanced at each other, then burst into laughter.

"What? What is it? Did I say something strange?" Bertine asked.

"Oh, I just thought how nice it is that you try so hard to see things from our perspective, Bertie."

"I agree with my son, Bertine. I never imagined someone like

you, born and raised abroad, would be willing to do so much for the Federation.”

A spontaneous chuckle escaped from Bertine’s lips.

“I was born in a wealthy nation and grew up privileged, so I always thought I was happy,” she said. “But my early days in this country taught me otherwise. Though I knew it was my obligation as a daughter of nobility to obey the edicts of my family and nation, I often thought that dying would be a much easier path to take. The experience feels like it happened so long ago, but the reality is that it was quite recent.”

“Bertie, is that true?” Evance stared at her in shock.

“It is. I had nowhere I belonged, and no one needed me. I used to think that merely existing posed a nuisance to everyone here. Back then, I wondered what purpose I even had. I wanted to escape the shackles of life altogether.”

“Oh, dear...” Cassandra looked distressed by her revelation.

“But then I discovered how kind the people here are and how delicious and varied your cuisines are. Case in point, today I learned how many varieties of fruits there are! Which is why now I’m deeply grateful that I didn’t die after all back then.”

Cassandra walked up to Bertine and gently wrapped her up in a hug. Then she reached up one hand and quietly stroked the younger woman’s hair. Cassandra’s petite frame barely brushed Bertine’s nose. Tall of height, Bertine rested her cheek on top of the older woman’s head and savored the embrace.

“My mother used to rub my head like this, too,” she said softly.

“Whenever you’re in pain, come to me without reservation,” Cassandra said. “Even if it’s in the middle of the night. Because you’re no longer a stranger to us, not after saving Evance. I’ll always welcome you with open arms and I know my husband will protect you too.”

“Thank you so much, Cassandra.”

The sun began to set and from a distance sounded various animal cries. “Gweee! Gweee!” “Gyaaa gyaaa!” Bertine could hear the sounds growing louder as they drew closer. She looked around, trying to pinpoint the source, when across the orchard she spotted a large herd of animals approaching.

“Oh, the emus,” Evance said. “Bertie, have you ever seen an

emu?”

“An emu? No, I don’t think so.”

They were bipedal animals a head or so taller than Evance, who himself was a large man. Birds, to be precise. This particular flock consisted of thirty individuals, all connected by a cord wrapped around their necks. An elderly man led them back to their homes. The emus possessed deep red feathers complemented by pure white tail feathers. They had thick, sturdy-looking legs. They would occasionally spread their wings with a rustle as they drew near the trio, along with the elderly man.

“Good lord, they’re massive...” Bertine said.

“Bertie, emu meat is light and tasty. Strong seasonings pair well with it, making alcohol go down easily, too.”

“Is it really? I knew of the bird, but I’d only ever seen illustrations in reference books.”

“They can even carry people as long as they aren’t too heavy.”

“Truly?!”

Bertine heard a rustling sound. When she looked in the direction from which it came, she saw an incredibly round, fat, brown creature walking out of the orchard. Big as a cat, it had round ears and a round tail. Its orb-like body was pleasingly plump. Though its legs were short, it moved quickly.

“Evance, what is that?” she asked.

“A ball rabbit. You’ve never heard of it?”

“A ball rabbit... No, I can’t say I have. It really is like a ball, just so round.”

“It’s an herbivore that only eats ripe, fallen fruits and leaves, which means its meat is quite delicious.”

“You can eat it?”

“We can and we do because it’s fatty and delectable. It tastes wonderful when seasoned in spices and stewed. It’s delicious even when the fat has melted away after grilling on skewers.”

“Darn it, Evance. Now I can’t see it as anything but a delicious lump of meat waiting to be eaten.”

All sorts of plans sprung into life in Bertine’s mind. She realized the depth of this country’s untapped and still unused resources.

“One important thing I’ve learned in the Federation, Evance, is that it’s impossible to talk about what this country has to offer without first eating some of its amazing food,” she said.

"You're right, Bertie. Let's leave the difficult topics for tomorrow. Tonight, we feast on delicious food and drink."

"I couldn't agree more. We leave the thinking for tomorrow!"

"Then why don't I make your favorite emu and ball rabbit dishes, Evance?" Cassandra offered.

A fierce desire to draft her plans welled up in Bertine, but she decided she could curb the need to work at least for the rest of the day. Especially because she found herself excited to see what would be on tonight's menu. She couldn't help laughing at how her mind was steadily becoming more and more like the people of this country.

"Cassandra, might I watch you as you cook?" she asked. "I'll stay out of your way, of course."

"Of course. I'd be even happier if you decided to help."

They all boarded the carriage and headed toward Evance's family home. Overhead in the sky, a flock of large, wild, green birds overtook them. Their long tails waved as they screeched, destined for their nesting grounds. It didn't take long for them to disappear into the evening light.

"This is paradise, isn't it...?" Bertine said.

"You know, my lady, I thought the very same thing," Dorothee wholeheartedly agreed.

"I still can't believe it took me twenty-four years to learn about this country, Dorothee. I wish I'd come here sooner."

"I agree. I'm tempted to send for my parents and have them live here too."

Cassandra beamed as she listened to their conversation and Evance looked just as happy in the coachman's seat.

Chapter 15: Flavor and Necklace

THAT night, Evance's family held a banquet in Bertine's honor. His nearby relatives also came, bringing the total in attendance to twenty people. A huge table took center stage in the spacious dining room. It looked like it had been sliced off a massive tree trunk and was surrounded by backless round chairs sporting thick cushions made from plant fibers.

Bertine sat diagonally across from Bruno. He was the only one who had a chair with a backrest as well as armrests.

"Everyone, this is Bertine," Bruno introduced her to the group. "She's the young lady who saved Evance in Ybit. Make sure you treat her with respect during her stay with us."

She felt nervous under their intense scrutiny, but the manners that had been drilled into her as a marquess's daughter automatically took over. An elegant smile graced her face as she bowed her head elegantly.

"Evance is a glutton, so his existence must be burning a hole in your monthly food budget, right?"

"If you're putting him up in your home, attic space should be plenty for him."

"Should he ever try anything untoward, you have my permission to toss him out on his rear!"

His family members teased Evance relentlessly. The man in question scratched his head in chagrin while responding.

"You know, I'd like to think I *am* doing a fairly decent job at being their bodyguard." But he mumbled his rebuttal, so no one heard him.

"Right, then, a toast to Bertine's kindness! Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Their short, cylindrical glasses were filled with a pale yellow cloudy alcohol. Bertine took a sip from hers and recognized the fruit from its scent.

"This is delicious! It's made from star fruit, isn't it?" she guessed.

"It is. You know the star fruit?"

"I do. I had the chance to try it earlier in the orchard."

The man sitting next to her inquired while pouring himself another cup of the spirit from the handled vase. He had drained his glass in one swallow. She guessed his age to be around forty.

"Some star fruits are bright red inside and the alcohol made from their flesh is delicious as well."

"Oh, I see. I'd love to try it someday," she said.

Dinner was being served as they talked. A whole spit-roasted piglet, river fish deep-fried with skin and all, roasted ball rabbit, and an emu stew. The meat dishes were the main event, but they were accompanied by a number of sides. Steamed potatoes, giant boiled flower buds, and a variety of fruits.

She helped herself to a piece of meat from the piglet, the crisp skin still attached. After sprinkling some rock salt and wrapping it in fragrant greens, she took a bite and felt the juices ooze into her mouth. It paired really well with the refreshing greens.

According to the man sitting next to her, the ball rabbit would have been brushed with a stingingly spicy sauce and roasted over open flames. The basting and roasting process would have been performed several times to deepen the flavor. The fat in the meat had a mild, sweet flavor.

The emu meat in the stew tasted almost exactly like chicken breast. Applying a sweet and salty paste made of nuts enhanced its flavor even more. Like this, she could have eaten an endless number of slices.

"I've heard imperial citizens aren't too fond of eating meat from unfamiliar animals, but you don't seem to have a problem with any of this," Bruno commented.

"Not at all, Bruno. I'll eat anything as long as it's delicious," Bertine said. "All the meat here is lovely, but I can't get enough of this steamed potato. The sticky texture is sublime."

"Isn't it? Try it with whichever sauce piques your fancy. I like this one the best, with the grated river crab meat in it."

"All right, here I go... Mmm! What incredible flavor. The crab's deep flavor complements the potato really well."

"It goes well with spirits, too."

While Bertine happily feasted on every dish, the door leading to the back of the room opened and five men entered, playing various musical instruments. She couldn't identify any of the

devices. A number of women, dancers, trailed in behind them.

“Ohho! We’ve been waiting for this!”

All around her, she heard whistles, claps, and cheers, so Bertine turned her attention to the entertainment as well. The dancers had their hair tied up in neat buns and splashy necklaces draped around their necks. Their matching scarlet dresses fit them perfectly while accentuating the curves of their bodies. In both hands, the women held tiny, disc-like percussion instruments, shaking them as they danced to the rhythm of the music. The twinkling, jangling sound fit right into the atmosphere.

“Oh, my...”

An older man sitting nearby noticed how entranced Bertine was by the performance.

“Are you enjoying the southlands’ dancing?”

“Yes! It’s so wonderful.”

“This particular dance is reserved to welcome honored guests. It isn’t something we’d ever show the imperials, but you’re special, young lady.”



The women continued undulating to the melody while ringing the instruments in their hands, winding between the seats throughout the room. Bertine devoured their movements with her eyes. She thought their dancing superb, but as the owner of an accessories shop, she couldn't tear her gaze away from the magnificent, sparkling necklaces draped across their chests. The scarlet cloth from which their dresses were made also captured her interest.

"At first glance, their necklaces appear identical, but a closer look reveals how unique each one is. Am I right?" she asked.

"Indeed you are. As long as the general size and shape are the same, the artisan can design the details however they please."

Each necklace was made of many parts that all joined together to form an inverted triangle on the chest. They didn't seem to be made of jewels, yet they nevertheless reflected the lamplight in a brilliant array of glittering hues.

It seemed to Bertine that the performance was about to reach its climax as the dancers' movements became ever more intense. The women spun around so ferociously, Bertine worried her eyes would roll into the back of her head if she wasn't careful. While continuing to dance, they moved steadily back toward the dining room entrance, and then finally, finished off their show by freezing in unison into dramatic poses. They should have been winded by all that movement, but not a single one panted heavily.

It would be impossible to stand so still without considerable effort. Bertine felt keenly the results of the women's intense practice. Applause exploded throughout the space and the dancers broke out into smiles. Bertine clapped so hard her hands hurt.

"Evan, don't you think we can sell those for a neat sum?!" Bertine exclaimed.

"What are you talking about, Bertie?"

"Those necklaces. Their opulence of style is something imperials would have never seen."

"Wait, you mean to sell those necklaces in the Empire? I don't think they'd be popular. As far as I know, the style hasn't changed since antiquity."

"That just conveys the sense of tradition even more. I think if the materials were changed, they would definitely sell well. Do you think I could use the design as inspiration? They're just all so

lovely. I'd also like to know how the dye is created for that beautiful scarlet color. I've never seen such a deep shade of it before."

Before Evance could respond, one of the dancers approached. A young woman, around seventeen or eighteen years old.

"Evance, it's you!" she exclaimed. "There were rumors you died, but I'm glad to see they were wrong."

"Don't just kill me off on a whim, Meira. I'm alive and well. Bertie here saved me."

"Thank you for taking care of him." Meira bowed her head to Bertine. "So? Does this mean you'll be returning home, Evance?"

"No, I won't. I plan on continuing to walk the path of the architect I've chosen for myself."

"No one will commission those fairy-tale houses of yours. It's well past time you woke up from the dream world and stepped into the real one."

"I won't. I won't return until I've built the house of my dreams."

Bertine sensed the argument escalating and interrupted before it could. "Meira, won't you tell me who made your necklace? It's such an incredible design."

"You have a good eye. I crafted this one as well as the other dancers' necklaces. I'm quite skilled at work like this, you see."

Bertine drew closer to Meira to inspect the necklace.

"What is it made of? It looks like seashells."

"Right again! The white ones are white-lipped pearl oysters I ordered from a district near the sea. I worked amethyst crystals into the design as well. The black ones are onyx, and the red ones are red spinel. All of the gems had flaws in them, so I was able to buy them for next to nothing."

Bertine continued her intense scrutiny of the necklace and thought to herself, *I think I can make this sell*. Her father had once suggested she make and sell her own accessories at wholesale prices to specialty stores in order to learn the fundamentals of business. When it came to accessories, both materials and design were vital. Depending on the sort of materials she used to create an extravagant necklace patterned after this one, she suspected even the high-ranking imperial nobles would happily spend their coin on it.

"Meira, I have a proposition for you," Bertine said. "Will you

let me buy each necklace design here today for one large silver coin?”

“You want to buy the *design*? And at one large silver coin per design? Not even the necklaces themselves?”

“That’s right. I’d like to copy these designs, with your permission, of course.”

“You don’t have to pay me for that. Take all the inspiration you like because the designs just all came to me spontaneously.”

Perhaps this attitude is exactly how the Empire has been so successful in ruthlessly exploiting the Southern Federation.

Chapter 16: A Business Opportunity

“TAKE all the inspiration you like.”

After hearing Meira give away her ideas for free, Bertine decided it was time to speak frankly to the younger woman.

“No, you can’t think like that,” she said. “The designs you created belong to *you*. Perhaps you may not mind giving away your ideas for free, especially to strangers, but it’s best to accept fair compensation for them. The things you create in your mind, as well as the wonderful things you bring to life. For example, the house designs Evance has. Only *he* can think of such beautiful designs, so they’re *his* products to sell.”

“Oh, really?” Meira tilted her head in thought at the new perspective Bertine provided. “I understand you’re complimenting my work, but I find myself irritated to have it lumped together with Evance’s odd houses.”

“Hey! Stop being so rude, Meira,” Evance said.

“But I can’t help it. I mean, your houses are literally the stuff of fairy tales. That’s the only place you can find buildings like that. On the other hand, my necklaces are real, tangible products with a purpose.”

Bertine smiled ruefully as she realized the two of them could only talk so frankly with each other because they were childhood friends. *Regardless, I need to make sure Meira grasps my point.*

“Let me explain this to you a bit more concretely,” she said. “If you showed your designs to an imperial or Luennian merchant, they would take them in a heartbeat without paying you anything for them. I understand that the people of the southlands have a generosity of spirit that doesn’t concern itself overly with money, and I love this about them. But money is important. When you’re hurt or sick, you need to pay money to receive the latest medical treatment, yes? If you have a dream, money increases the odds of making it into reality.”

“A dream?”

“Yes. Imagine this, Meira. You marry then have children of

your own. Let's say your children have tremendous talents and you want to nurture those talents. But you lack the funds to do so. This means as soon as your children are old enough, the first thing they'll have to do is find work just to feed themselves instead of their talents. Survival will take precedence."

"That's true, I suppose."

By this point, Bertine had gathered an audience interested in hearing her thoughts. Except the woman herself remained unaware, focused as she was on presenting her argument.

"I have my own opinion on why His Excellency decided to set a minimum viable price for the sale of wheat," she continued. "He told me he wants to build hospitals and schools to secure the future for this country's children. But I think his reasons go beyond just financial security. He wants the children to have a future where work isn't just something they *have* to do because it's the only option. The future he envisions for them has all sorts of paths they can choose for themselves. And *that* is why I believe he's so insistent on the citizens of this country demanding a fair price for the wheat they grow. To know their own worth for themselves and their children."

"You only met me today, so why do you worry about me like this?" Meira questioned Bertine with a curious look on her face.

"Of course, I'm concerned for you, but... Hmmm...I would have to say I think like this for the sake of all young people and children who will support the country as they grow older."

This was the moment Bertine finally noticed how she had captured everyone's attention with her impromptu speech.

"Oh, my, I'm so sorry. I spoke too arrogantly as someone who hasn't lived in the Federation very long. Please forgive me."

"No, not at all. What you said makes perfect sense even though it's a mindset we're not familiar with here," the Bilva district's chief Bruno agreed with her. "Thanks to the sun and the soil, our people have never starved. Which is why we looked down on the imperials for being greedy curs since all they ever spoke of was money, money, and more money. But you also have a point because money can certainly make dreams come true."

"Until eight years ago, my homeland, the Kingdom of San Luenne, only had salt and seafood to sell as commercial products," Bertine explained. "But the Empire had its own salt and maritime industries, so they would negotiate a hard bargain with Luennians

back then, forcing us to sell for low prices. Fertile land was extremely limited, which meant most families could barely grow enough vegetables to sustain themselves, never mind export for trade. In those days, the continuance of bad weather often led to terrible food shortages. Many people were forced to end their lives by throwing themselves into the sea.”

“You don’t say? Something like that occurred in San Luenne even though it’s drowning in money?”

Bertine smiled ruefully at Bruno’s description then continued relating to everyone what she had learned of the history of her nation.

“Yes. Too many people lost their lives too young to the sea. Others were destitute, so they emigrated to the Empire looking for work. But there, they could only find the most dangerous of work. It was a particularly awful period of time for our people and the catalyst for transforming our country into one specializing in tourism. As a result of the changes, a majority of San Luenne’s citizens now live to a ripe old age. And even when some few go to the Empire to work, they’re no longer forced to accept jobs with terrible conditions.”

“We always ridiculed the Kingdom as the Empire’s remora, but now I see that your country has a past like that.” The man who’d been sitting next to Bertine helping himself to the vase of liquor questioned her with a surprised expression.

“Indeed. There aren’t many still alive who experienced that terrible time, so perhaps that explains why present-day Luennians are a bit too fixated on money. They’ve forgotten the wish of the king three generations prior, that his people live safe, healthy lives. I myself am guilty of this. Until I arrived in the Federation, I arrogantly used to think that a life of luxury equaled happiness.”

The older man who had talked to her about the dance seemed intrigued by her words as he spoke. “Does that mean your thinking has changed then?”

“It does. Living here changed my mind. I learned how warm and kind everyone in my neighborhood back in the capital is. I’ll forever be grateful to them for their generosity to me and Dorothee, and that’s something money can’t buy. Coming here to the hinterlands further deepened my new mindset. In my eyes, this country is paradise.”

All the guests in attendance burst into laughter at once upon

hearing that, shattering the quiet attentiveness up until then.

“Well, blast, you noticed, eh? But you’re right. Our nation epitomizes paradise itself. There’s no need to work yourself to the bone or die from starvation. Even those living in ramshackle houses don’t have to fear freezing to death. Though we don’t have much money, we still think of this place as paradise.”

Everyone nodded in agreement and returned to drinking and eating happily. Then they all took turns speaking with Bertine.

“Our country is indeed paradise. But those who come from the Empire have nothing but ridicule and insults for us. Once they bargain for whatever they need from us, they leave immediately. No interest in our dances or our foods like emu.”

“You’re different from them, young lady.”

Laughter abounded throughout the room and the merrymaking increased in volume and intensity. Watching it all, Bertine realized she felt right at home here. Because in the Kingdom of San Luenne, soirées were just another kind of battleground. One must always be fashionable. One must always be elegant. One must always dance beautifully. One must always make thoughtful conversation. For what went unsaid was one must do all this better than others. She hadn’t hated the convention per se, but she had never really been comfortable at any event due to the pressure.

But no one here made any comparisons, whether against themselves or others. Because winning was in the enjoyment.

“Bertie.”

“What is it, Meira?”

“I’ll sell you my necklace designs. There’s a total of six, which means the price comes to six large silver coins. Are you sure you want to pay that?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

Meira let out a long sigh. “I work at my family’s farm, you see.”

“Go on.”

“And I’ve never been paid.”

“Oh, really?”

“Well, we don’t really need money to do most things here. On the few occasions I *do* need money, I ask my father by giving him the reason for it.”

That seems a bit inconvenient, Bertine thought to herself. *After all, there are things a young woman might want that she can’t explain to*

her father. Things she can live without certainly, but things that would nonetheless gratify the heart's desire.

Meira laughed wryly as if she had read Bertine's mind. "But my father is in his forties and some things are just too difficult to tell him. So with six large silver coins, I can buy whatever I want, don't you think?"

"You can indeed. Because having the things you want but don't need is the source of one's motivation! Perfume, cosmetics, accessories, and the like."

"Fine, luxurious undergarments, for example."

"Mm-hmm."

"I've always wanted to wear frothy, lacey undergarments made in the Empire."

Ah-ha. Products like that will always appeal to young women regardless of nationality. Bertine could relate.

"I'll pay you tomorrow, so please allow me to sketch all six designs," Bertine requested.

"Thank you, Bertie. I never even imagined until now how the ideas in my mind could turn into money. This is the first time in my life I'll have earned my own coin. I suddenly feel very mature."

Bertine clasped Meira's hands tightly in hers.

"And I can't thank you enough for the business opportunity!"

Chapter 17: A Blessing with a Time Limit

THE next day, Bertine diligently worked at drawing copies of the necklace designs. The more she studied the innovative designs of the gorgeous necklaces, the more she lost herself in them.

“Bertine, why don’t you rest for a bit? I’m worried you’ll tire yourself out.”

“Thank you, Cassandra. I was having so much fun I lost track of the time.”

Right around the time Bertine finished sketching all six necklaces, she heard the sound of several horses outside. The messengers had returned, each holding a contract from their assigned chief.

“Chas, why have you come back empty-handed?” Bruno asked a messenger.

“Forgive me, my lord. I couldn’t persuade Lord Kurt.”

“No surprise, since he always insists on opposing my every opinion,” Bruno sighed. “If my back didn’t still pain me, I would jump on a horse right now and shout him down.”

Bertine had been quietly listening to the two men’s conversation, waiting for the right time to insert herself into it. “Bruno, would it be impolite if I visited this Lord Kurt myself?”

“Hm. Not impolite exactly, but I think the journey would be wasted considering your nationality.”

Bertine smiled faintly in response. “Should I end up failing, at least I’ll be able to enjoy the views of paradise on the return trip. So please do allow me to go.”

“I take it from the look on your face you have no intention of listening to me,” Bruno said wryly. “Then go on, make your visit, but don’t go alone. Take a guard with you. What says you, Evance?”

“Of course, I’m going with her,” Evance said. “I’ve been her escort from the start.”

Dorothée would stay behind at Bruno’s house while Bertine and Evance would be accompanied by two of Bruno’s men.

PREPARATIONS complete, the four of them set out to meet Lord Kurt. Bruno sent them off, then turned and spoke to Cassandra while massaging his back.

“Cassandra, do you think all of San Luenne’s women are warriors like her?”

“Haha. I wonder, I wonder. Though I definitely agree with you about Bertine being a warrior. She told me herself that she requested the most difficult region when the civil servant asked her if she had any preference. But I still find it hard to believe she willingly chose to come to the hinterlands despite knowing the challenges that awaited.”

Bruno boomed with laughter upon hearing this news. Almost immediately after his fit of humor, he groaned in pain, pressing down on his back.

“I see. She truly is a warrior woman. I was impressed by her perspective when I listened to her and Meira talk last night. She’s working for the children who will support this country’s future, eh? I was considering asking her if she’d like to become Evance’s bride, you know. What say you, dear wife?”

“Hm, I don’t think it will work,” Cassandra said. “I certainly can’t imagine our timid Evance catching a strong-willed warrior woman like her...”

“You’re right.”

They exchanged wry smiles, then, holding hands, made their way leisurely back inside the house.

BERTINE rode double with one of the escorts. *If I truly intend to make a life in this country, I must learn how to ride a horse*, had been her thought process. After all, carriages weren’t nearly as mobile as the horses themselves.

They took two breaks on their way to Lord Kurt’s home and arrived late in the afternoon.

“We come here from the Bilva district,” Evance said. “Please inform Lord Kurt that we seek an audience with him.”

Upon Evance’s request, the group of four was guided to a parlor. A moment later, a large man sporting a shock of white hair entered the room. Without even giving any of them a chance to

introduce themselves, Kurt spoke bluntly.

“You can come as many times as you want, but my answer will remain the same. I will not accept Bruno’s command on the matter of the wheat’s sale price.”

“Please wait.”

Bertine rose from her seat and Kurt glared at her with large, blue eyes.

“I don’t need an outsider to interfere in my business,” he growled.

“I won’t deny that I’m an outsider, but I’m also the person entrusted with this task directly by His Excellency himself,” Bertine said, meeting his challenge. “Therefore, Lord Kurt, I’d like to know why you sell your wheat so cheaply. Please tell me a reason that both I and His Excellency can understand.”

Kurt sat down in a chair, picked up a tin mug and swallowed the tea within in a single gulp. Then he slammed the empty mug down on the table with a loud *bang*.

“Money, money, money! It’s always about money with you lot. My broker and I have known each other since we were both unmarried, young lads. Regardless of His Excellency uniting the Federation or our victory in the war, my relationship with my broker will not change. Do you truly think I can do something that could cause cracks in it?!”

Bertine had expected just such an objection, so she confronted him with the information she had procured on the way here. “I know that your relationship with your broker goes back thirty years. In those thirty years, the price of wheat has gone up sixfold in the Empire. Can you tell me if the price of wheat grown in your territory has seen a corresponding sixfold increase?”

Kurt’s eyes twitched for just a second, but Bertine noticed and it was enough of an answer to her question. She suspected he didn’t know about the market value of wheat in the Empire. No, he had probably never sought the information, not once in thirty years.

“A true friendship can continue without commerce. So, for the sake of this country’s future, won’t you please consider abiding by His Excellency’s edict and negotiate a new price of at least seven large silver coins per wagonload of wheat?” Bertine requested. “If you find the prospect too difficult to do it yourself with your broker, I would gladly do it on your behalf. I have no trouble visiting him at his home in the Empire to do so.”

Kurt felt a hint of fear. If she spoke the truth about the market price of wheat increasing six times in the Empire, then that would mean he had merely been an easy target for the man he called friend. He recalled an old memory, of a time when the two of them poured drinks for each other and spoke of their dreams. They had both sworn then to rise upward in the world. But he wondered if his friend had willingly abandoned their promise and friendship a long time ago.

For in these past thirty years, the sale price for wheat grown in Kurt's territory had only gone up threefold. Which made him question where the difference went. Perhaps in the coffers of the man he'd believed was a friend.

"Please give me some time to think..."

Before Kurt could finish his sentence, the door opened. Bertine's eyes widened in surprise when she saw the young woman enter.

"Why are *you* here of all places?!" the woman cried in a high-pitched voice.

"Bianca, mind your manners," Kurt censured her. "This is—"

"I know who she is! The woman from the Empire who tried to press Lord Cecilio into marriage!"

"Oh...? Did she now?" Kurt looked at Bertine again.

Bertine sighed internally at the unexpected arrival. But she had no intention of backing down now. She fully believed in His Excellency's vision for this country. And if she withdrew at this juncture, it would mean giving up on the paradise she had finally discovered, a place where she truly felt like she belonged.

"I won't deny that my homeland attempted to use me as part of the reparations due to the Federation," she explained. "But His Excellency refused their proposal, and I myself have no desire to marry him either."

"Then why did you accept this duty?" Kurt asked.

"Because I love this country."

Bianca snorted derisively at that. "As if anyone would believe you. You're nothing more than an unmarried spinster desperate to change your status by cozying up to His Excellency. Father, you mustn't be deceived by this person."

"Lord Kurt. I realize I might be asking a lot of you since you're her father, but will you allow me to express my honest thoughts to this young lady?" Bertine requested.

“An intriguing idea. Proceed.”

“Father!”

Bertine stood up again, straightened herself to her full stature, and pierced Bianca with her eyes.

“On the last occasion and now, you have used my age to humiliate me. But youth is a blessing bestowed by God equally to every human being. So I suggest you reconsider wielding it as your own personal achievement. Here’s another bit of information you might not be aware of. Youth has a time limit. Even the foolish and lazy have it, but it expires quickly. When the blessing known as youth reaches its time limit, what then will you use to take pride in yourself? What then will you use to humiliate me?”

Bianca had no response to Bertine’s challenge.

“I have studied commerce, the Empire’s culture, and this country’s official language as well,” Bertine continued. “And now I work desperately to become someone this country can rely on. What about you, Bianca? In a few years, when you’re the same age I am now, what boasts will you have for me then? According to your own logic, you too will have lost your vaunted youth by then, yes?”

A booming laugh broke the stinging tension in the air.

“Bianca, it seems she’s an opponent you’re no match for.”

“Father!”

“Thanks to the lies you told at His Excellency’s estate about being his betrothed or what have you, Cecilio gave me a right earful I won’t soon forget,” Kurt said sternly. “It’s well past time for you to accept defeat and marry the man I’ve chosen for you, Bianca.”

“I won’t! I won’t!” She accompanied her angry scream with a glare at Bertine then raced out of the room.

“I’m sorry,” Kurt said. “I should have raised her better. She was born when I was well past my prime, so I couldn’t help spoiling her and instead failed to discipline her properly.”

“Not at all. I certainly could have done a better job at restraining myself as well,” Bertine responded.

“This is exactly the sort of lesson Bianca needs to learn. In fact, allow me to thank you as her father. As you can see, she’s become an extremely prideful person without the necessary effort or achievements.”

Chapter 18: Dorothée's Resolve

“YOU know, young lady, I find it unusual how adept you are at using our official tongue,” Kurt said. “I always thought the Empire was full of aristocrats who refused to study our language because of their contemptuous attitude toward us.”

“My father believed that a day may come when the Federation became more powerful than the Empire, so in my childhood, he was most insistent that I learn at least your official language,” Bertine explained.

“Hmmm,” Kurt said, rubbing his chin with his right hand. He seemed to be deep in thought. “I’d like to meet your father someday and have a nice, long chat with him. He sounds like a right interesting individual. Setting that aside, did the market price of wheat in the Empire truly go up sixfold?”

“Yes. In these last thirty years, the wheat price has increased by a factor of six and eggs by four. The increase in pork consumption also raised pork prices by eightfold.”

Everyone in the room stared at Bertine in astonishment at the information.

“Don’t tell me you know the prices of everything?” Kurt asked, incredulous.

“I memorized the approximate annual prices of important foodstuffs, textiles, and fuels such as firewood and coal. Well, it would be more accurate to say, I was *forced* to memorize the data.”

“Well, isn’t that something? I expected no less of your education in a country famous for its money grubbers,” Kurt said. “Your elders certainly leave no stone unturned, even in the rearing of children. In a sense, I find it refreshing to see how far your people’s obsession with money goes.”

Bertine laughed ruefully at learning how many different nicknames her homeland had in the Federation.

“I read His Excellency’s letter explaining his reasoning for establishing a minimum sale price for wheat. He wrote it was to raise capital to build hospitals and schools. As a San Luennian, do

you think he speaks the truth?" Kurt asked.

"I do, because I believe he sees this country as it should be twenty, thirty years from now."

"Understood. I'll obey His Excellency's edict. The friendship I treasured so dearly seems only to have been on my side anyway."

Kurt looked tired, resigned, but he nevertheless agreed to fill out the document Bertine presented to him. It had sections to note past sale prices, future sale prices, and the approximate total count of wheat production by the wagonload in the region. Soon after signing the paperwork, Bertine and her small troop thanked him for his hospitality and prepared to set out.

Kurt insisted they stay the night, but she politely declined his offer. He then dragged Bianca out of her room to join him in the send-off outside. Bianca glared daggers at her, but Bertine remained unfazed as she waved and smiled at her and her father. The four of them departed for Evance's family home.

Almost full, the bright moon illuminated the dark highway as the horses trotted leisurely. Green fields lined both sides of the road. The cries of various animals rang out from the depths of the forest, unnerving Bertine a little.

"Bertie, the more I learn about you, the more amazing I think you are."

"Oh, stop it, Evance. You're exaggerating."

"You do realize it isn't normal to memorize thirty years' worth of prices for essentially all goods?"

"If I couldn't do at least that much, I wouldn't have been able to outdo my peers. That's the country I was raised in, you see. It faced myriad difficulties, exacerbated by its small size and lack of natural resources. So we had to compensate in other ways."

It was late by the time they returned to Bruno's home in the Silva district. Bertine headed straight for the room she'd been furnished, eager to rest.

"I can barely keep my eyes open. Good night, Dorothée."

"You've more than earned your rest today, my lady."

Bertine fell into a deep sleep right away, but Dorothée remained awake as excitement bubbled quietly within her. Ever since moving to the Federation, her charge had undergone such tremendous growth that she was like another person entirely. Lady Bertine had always been a gentle, considerate person, but she had

grown so much stronger. No matter how awfully life kicked her down, she determinedly stood back up and pushed ahead. Dorothée couldn't be more proud of her lady's newfound boldness.

Bertine had insisted she and Dorothée share a room here. The woman beamed as she watched her lady sleep peacefully. *It's true what they say about adversity revealing a person's true worth.* Bertine turned over in her sleep and managed to kick off the light quilt covering her. Dorothée stood up and quietly tugged it back over Bertine. The action brought back a terrible memory.

NOT long after the marquess remarried, Lady Bertine caught a bad cold and ended up bedridden when it worsened. It was Dorothée's job to look after her lady in times of illness, but the new marchioness had asked if she could take care of her new daughter instead. Dorothée had acquiesced, glad that her master's new wife was a kind woman, so she had entrusted Bertine's care to the other woman for two days.

On the third day though, Dorothée decided she should give the new mistress a rest from nursing Bertine back to health. *My lady must be tired as well by now.* Late at night, she visited Bertine's chambers. Light glowed from underneath the door, which made her extremely grateful to the new marchioness for looking after Bertine so late into the night.

Dorothée chose to forego a knock on the door because she didn't want to wake up her young charge. So she quietly opened the door and stepped inside soundlessly. Just as she was about to make her way to Bertine's bedroom, she froze. The door to the bedroom was slightly ajar, allowing the heat from the fireplace to warm this darkened sitting room as well. What she saw beyond the door to the brightly lit bedroom shocked her.

The marchioness sat in a chair by the bed, a seemingly gentle smile on her face as she watched Lady Bertine. Except no quilt covered her lady's still form on the bed. She must have kicked it off at some point as she tossed and turned, but shouldn't the mistress have moved it back into place? Because Lady Bertine lay curled into a fetal position, clad only in her nightclothes, unconsciously hugging herself against the chill brought on by the cooling fever sweat. The damp cloth applied to her forehead had also slipped off.

What? What is this? Why isn't she doing anything to help Lady

Bertine?

Dorothée struggled to comprehend the situation. *Did I just see something I shouldn't have?* Obeying her instinct, she stealthily exited the sitting room and returned to the hallway outside. Heart pounding in her chest, she faced the door again from the outside. This time she knocked loudly.

"Please wait a moment."

She waited patiently for a few moments after the mistress spoke in her calm voice.

"You may enter."

At the command, she rushed into the bedroom. There, she found her lady positioned properly on her back in the bed. Her quilt had been drawn up as far as her neck and a new damp cloth had been placed on her forehead.

Dorothée's suspicion transformed into certainty. She quelled the urge to shudder at the mistress's smile. Instead, she responded with one of her own.

"My lady, you must be exhausted. Please, take your rest tonight. I'll take over."

The marchioness inclined her head and stood up. Once Dorothée made sure she had left Bertine's chambers, she locked the door behind her and rushed back into the bedroom. She peeled back the bedspread covering the young lady. Upon touching Bertine's arms and legs, she discovered how cold her body was. Fine tremors wracked her lady. Her nightclothes had cooled as well after absorbing her fever sweat.

Dorothée hurriedly changed Bertine's clothes while she slept. With a "Beg your pardon," she slid into the bed next to Bertine and wrapped her arms around the girl, warming her chilled, trembling body. She could have brought a bottle filled with hot water instead, but Dorothée had wanted to hug her charge and warm her up with her own body heat.

She would never forgive the new marchioness for what she'd done to Bertine. Especially because her lady had lost her mother when she was so young. Dorothée held her until morning, not catching even a wink of sleep. She worried all night about whether she should inform the master of what she'd witnessed, but his new wife was the queen's younger sister and the marriage itself had been decreed by the king.

It's likely my lord couldn't refuse the match and I highly doubt he'll

be able to divorce her either now. Then as long as the mistress remains in this house, I must make sure she never realizes I know her true nature. If she does, I have no doubt she'll dismiss me at once. And I can't let that happen because it would leave Lady Bertine without a protector. I must make the marchioness think I don't know anything, so I can protect my lady to the very end. This is the best option.

Dorothee's thoughts circled endlessly until light shone through the curtains. The ill treatment of stepchildren wasn't unheard of, but the new mistress had seemed calm and gentle. She had treated Lady Bertine and the household staff kindly thus far. Which made her all the more terrifying now because all the servants on the estate, including Dorothee, had been clearly deceived. Dorothee suspected the marquess was also unaware of the woman's frightening nature.

My lady in heaven, I'll protect Lady Bertine to my last breath, even at the cost of my own life. So, please, I beg of you to lend me your strength any way you can.

Dorothee finally felt Lady Bertine's body return to a natural warmth while she slept and hugged her even tighter. The girl, only three years younger than Dorothee, unconsciously returned the hug with her slender frame.

"It's all right, my lady, it's all right. I'm here. I'm right here."

She whispered the words softly, reassuringly.

Dorothee dozed, remembering the past. From far away, she heard the throaty cries of the emus and the shrill squawks of the wild birds flying in their flocks. Even more distantly, the howling of monkeys sounded from the depths of the forest.

God, my lady in heaven, please watch over Bertine. On that hope, she rose from her bed. Then she heard the hoofbeats of two horses outside. Soon, she would learn they belonged to Diego and Elias.

Chapter 19: A Reunion with the Marquess's Soldiers

“**DIEGO!** Elias! What are you doing here?!”

The two exhausted men rushed toward Bertine.

“My lady, your father insisted you return home at once.”

“What? If I do that, my existence itself will be a black mark on his and Geraldo’s reputations.”

“No, it won’t, but even should the gossip mongers have their way, your father doesn’t care. He also mentioned he would pay the deficit in the reparations himself, no matter how many years it takes him. It pained my lord deeply when he heard about your terrible experience.”

Bertine found herself in an unexpected fix. The matter of her treatment at His Excellency’s estate was resolved as far as she was concerned. Her return to San Luenne would only mean subjecting herself once more to its rigid society. Except this time, she would be forced to live her life in shame as damaged goods.

“I’m sorry to say this after you’ve journeyed such a long way, but I have no intention of going back,” she informed them. “No, I *won’t* go back. I swore to myself I would gain strength and build a life here with my own two hands. I’ll write a detailed letter explaining everything to Father. Would you mind giving it to him? You came all the way here, but to hear such an answer from me... I truly am so sorry.”

Elias replied before he even realized the words he said.

“My lady, are you perhaps hesitant to return because of a certain individual? If so, I’ll do everything in my power to protect you.”

When she heard Elias’s appeal, Dorothée immediately understood who Elias referred to. Her expression tightened.

“A certain individual? Whom do you mean, Elias?” Bertine asked.

“Well...the marchioness.”

“Ah-ha. I’m not particularly fond of my stepmother, but I don’t

hate her either. Why would you be worried about her, though?"

Diego stepped in and explained the reason for his initial delay in carrying out the marquess's command.

"I see... I do see, indeed. She's finally shown her true colors through this use of force then," Bertine nodded. "For the past ten years, I used to wonder if she actually hated me. But she never did anything to hurt me, so I thought it must be my imagination, and we managed to get along civilly enough. But...she told you not to come for me, hm?"

Bertine reflected on the situation. Watching her, Dorothée could no longer keep her silence.

"My lady, you absolutely do not have to return," she insisted. "This country was made for you. Besides, there's no reason for you to return to a household where that person is."

"That person? The marchioness, I take it. Wasn't she kind to the staff?" Bertine asked. "And me as well. Although there were times when I found her watching me and the smile on her lips never reached her eyes. I thought that part of her was frankly frightening."

Dorothée realized her lady had no memory of the time she was ill, so she swallowed back the words she wanted to say.

"My lady, please, come home with us," Diego urged.

"Diego. Truthfully, I think I can solve the problem of the reparations myself because Father's strict education actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise," Bertine told him. "I believe I'll be able to pay the sum of one thousand large gold coins to this country in less than a year."

"Impossible, my lady!"

"It isn't."

Dorothée took the opportunity to persuade Diego.

"Diego, I can attest to what she says. I've witnessed Lady Bertine's efforts myself and in a short amount of time, she's already earned a few hundred large gold coins. She's built relationships with the citizens of this country, including several of the tribal chiefs whose trust she earned. So, please, don't fret. I'll continue to protect her."

"Moreover, His Excellency Cecilio isn't the awful man I thought he was either," Bertine added. "He earnestly apologized to me for his servants' discourtesy, holding himself accountable for their behavior."

But her guilt didn't dissipate as she looked at the exhausted soldiers.

"In any case, you both need to rest first."

They gratefully accepted the offer and headed inside the house. The two men availed themselves of the hot water Bruno's servants prepared for their baths. Afterward, they sat down to dine on the food made by the cooks. While they were occupied recovering from their long journey, Bertine wrote a long letter to her father.

She mentioned His Excellency's apology and remorse over her treatment at his manse. How she now had an official task that would allow her to repay the shortfall in the reparations. Her love for this country. And her desire to become a stronger person here, someone who was needed.

Clean and refreshed after a change of clothes and a hearty meal, Diego decided to tell Bertine what Cecilio had told him after some hesitation.

"My lady, His Excellency informed us that San Luenne's royal family knew about his rejection of their marriage offer. He suspects they hid this information from the marquess."

"Hmmm. Interesting. I had my suspicions, and I'm glad to have them confirmed," Bertine said. "Which is all the more reason I can't return. If I did, I know the royal family would find a way to punish Father. I think they're intent on finding any way they can to collar him."

As chancellor, her father went above and beyond in fulfilling his duties. But he was so much more than that. Before accepting his current political role, he had excelled in commerce with a remarkable talent for it. He'd been famous as "the alchemist who can make money even out of air." Counting on those abilities, the current king had appointed her father as the chancellor when he ascended to the throne. For a long time now, Bertine had suspected the royal family feared his genius while simultaneously desiring it.

"Diego, Elias, I want you to listen to me and listen well," Bertine addressed her father's men. "I made a promise to myself when I arrived in this nation. That I would become so powerful that no one could ever hurt me again."

"Understood, my lady."

"Now, I'll tell you something I want you to tell Father directly. I didn't write this in the letter on the slim chance someone else gets

their hands on it and tries to interfere with my plan. I intend to build a hotel so charming here in the Federation that one day imperials from all over will be coming in droves, eager to spend their coin to stay there. A fascinating idea, don't you think?"

"Be that as it may, I'm baffled why *you* need to be the one to do it, my lady."

"Because I want to challenge myself. I can't guarantee I'll succeed, though."

Dorothée giggled happily. "My lady, at long last, I know what exactly has consumed your mind these past few months here. So, *this* was the idea brewing in your head. I expected no less of you. My admiration for you grows even more."

"I knew you'd say that, Dorothée," Bertine smiled back at her.

Elias smiled, convinced by their arguments. "You've changed a great deal, my lady."

"Whether or not my dream becomes reality, I can live happily in this country," she said. "So, please, there's no need to worry about me. Do you understand now? Can you trust me?"

Diego ruminated in silence for a bit before nodding. "I do, on both counts. Elias, you'll inform the marquess about Lady Bertine's intentions. But I'll remain here as your guard because my lord instructed me to stay with you if you decided not to return. Your father knows you well enough to have anticipated your refusal as well."

"No, I can't allow you to do that, Diego," Bertine refused. "You have a home and family to protect."

"I had a feeling you would say as much," he said with a laugh. "Fear not, for I confided the entire sordid tale to my wife and swore her to secrecy before I departed San Luenne. The last thing she told me before I left was that she wanted her husband to perform his duties proudly as the captain of the marquess's private army."

"Oh, my, what an indomitable woman. Then, thank you, Diego, I gladly accept your offer. Elias, please protect my father."

"Yes, my lady!"

Elias tucked away the letter within his breast pocket and prepared for the journey back to San Luenne. The three of them sent him off together. Bertine's expression was bright as he faded into the distance.

"My lady, my lord entrusted me with a great deal of money, so please take it," Diego whispered to her.

“Oh. Oh, dear. Hm, Diego, you’re certain I can use it however I please?” Bertine turned her attention to Evance, who’d been silently taking in their conversation. “Evance.”

“Yes, Bertie, my lady.”

“Would you like to study in the Empire?” she asked. “Quit your current post at the company in Ybit and go to the Empire for a formal education in the fundamentals of all the latest architectural techniques. I’ll pay for your expenses. Consider it as an investment in you by me and my father. Once you’ve learned all you can in the Empire, I want you to come back here and work for me.”

Evance’s gaze alternated between a smiling Bertine and a worried Diego. Then he asked her nervously.

“Bertie, aren’t you afraid I’ll run away with that money?”

“Not at all. You wouldn’t devastate your parents by doing such an awful thing.”

“You see right through me, eh? Bertie, I won’t waste this opportunity. I’ll learn everything there is to know about architecture in the Empire. And then I’ll prove myself to you by helping you bring your dream to life.”

“Good. That’s the spirit,” Bertine smiled at him. “I’m counting on you, Evance.”

Dorothée unconsciously pressed both hands together on her heart.

“My lady, life has become even more exciting now, hasn’t it?!”

“Indeed it has, Dorothée. And I’m sure it’ll become even more fun.”

Chapter 20: To the Citizens of the Federation

BERTINE'S work was finished now that she had the written pledges of commitment from the hinterlands' seven chiefs.

"I really don't see why you have to rush back to the capital."

"I appreciate the thought, Cassandra," Bertine thanked the woman. "But I want to get these documents to His Excellency as soon as possible, so I must leave soon. I just have one concern left here."

"What is it? You can tell me anything." Bruno peered at Bertine's face. He too was interested in hearing her answer.

"The scarlet fabric," she said. "I wish I had the time to learn how to make the dye as well as the dyeing process."

"Ah-ha, so that's what plagued you. Then I'll send one of my people along with you, one who knows the particulars."

"No, that won't do, especially because they're busy with their own life. In exchange, though, please allow me to visit you again soon."

"You just stop right there and let me handle this, young lady."

So saying, Bruno stepped away to speak to one of the servants and returned within moments.

"Meira's mother is the one who dyes the cloth. The girl always helps her, so she knows a great deal about the process. Take Meira with you. Her older brother lives in Ybit too, so you don't have to put her up either."

"But...is it really all right to make such a sudden request?" Bertine asked.

"Yes, it's fine."

Bruno may be firm on the matter, but I would hate to inconvenience Meira. Bertine regretted even opening her mouth about this. Not even half an hour later, she heard the rattle of a small carriage.

"I'll go! I'll go, so take me with you!" Meira jumped down and raced inside the house, shouting excitedly.

"Are you sure?" Bertine asked. "You haven't even had time to

really think about this.”

“Of course, I am, and I definitely have. I don’t plan on living in Ybit, but I’ve always wanted to visit,” Meira said. “I just never had a reason to go until now. I know all the details about how to dye the cloth because I’ve been helping my mother do so since I was a small child. Leave it to me!”

Bertine could understand a young lady’s desire to visit the big city, but she also knew she would be shouldering a great burden by taking her along. She worried about Meira’s safety on the journey back.

“Stop fretting, Bertine. Once I teach you the process, I’ll head straight home,” Meira promised. “With a collection of stylish things I can only find in Ybit, of course!”

“Meira, you dolt, this isn’t a sightseeing trip,” Evance chimed in.

“I *know* that, Evance, you oaf. I’ll just take the opportunity to play the tourist when it presents itself, is all.”

So it was decided that Meira would join them. Their carriage loaded with a great many souvenirs and a large amount of tree bark, Bertine and her group were ready to depart for Ybit.

“Bertine, visit us again soon, hm?” Cassandra said. “And next time for pleasure, not business.”

“Yes! I would love to, Cassandra.”

“Look after our son, will you?” Bruno requested. “Ybit is cold, and I’d rather the poor lad didn’t catch a chill because he didn’t cover his belly.”

“Father, enough!” Evance cried.

“Leave it to me, Bruno. Thank you again for your wonderful hospitality.”

THE carriage started its journey north and before they knew it, they arrived in Ybit. Evance quit his job at his company and prepared to move to the Empire.

“Right then, I’m off to the Empire,” he said.

“Evance, be careful of pickpockets,” Bertine cautioned.

“Yes, ma’am! I will.”

“And make sure you keep your belly covered at all times,” Diego chimed in. “Wouldn’t want you getting sick.”

“Diego, I’m begging you, don’t tease me. Wish me luck,

everyone!”

Off he went. At least until he turned right around.

“Did you forget something, Evance?” Bertine asked.

“Not quite. I just remembered I know only a smattering of the imperial language. What do I do, Bertie?”

“Oh, my, I completely forgot myself. But you’ll be fine. Hire an interpreter using the funds I gave you. There should be enough to take on the expense while still allowing you to live comfortably. Hold on a minute. I’ll write down the name and address of a company I trust for you. They have many wonderful interpreters on staff. The teacher who taught me the Federation’s official language owns the business. But I suggest you learn imperial yourself as soon as you can.”

“Ahhh, I’m always putting you to trouble at every juncture! I don’t know how I can ever repay you...”

“I do. Succeed in the task I’ve set for you,” she said.

“Now *that* I can do!”

Bertine waved him off with a smile then left to visit Cecilio.

THE Federation’s capitol building.

“Your Excellency, I come bearing the written pledges of the hinterlands’ seven chiefs,” Bertine said. “They have all agreed to abide by your edict concerning the wheat’s selling price. The documents detail past sale prices, future sale prices, the quantity of wheat to be exported, and the approximate number of wagonloads of wheat for sale as well.”

“Well...this is a surprise,” Cecilio responded. “How did you manage to succeed in such a short time? It would have been impossible for you to visit each chief in a few days *and* convince them to consent, even if you had rushed.”

Bertine kept her expression cool, trying hard not to look proud of herself.

“Perhaps the answer is...a testament of my skill?”

Saying that about herself almost made her howl with laughter.

“Honestly, I really am stunned. Did you use magic then?” he asked in a teasing voice.

“Ohhohohoho. I’ll leave that up to your imagination.”

“Right then, how much money did you keep in the Federation through your work in the hinterlands?”

“Between all seven chiefs, I prevented a total of 569 large gold coins from flowing to the Empire. Combined with the amount I saved via the farms in Ybit’s metropolis, my total thus far comes to 652.”

She answered his question immediately, without even taking a pause to breathe. Cecilio froze in shock for an instant then a pleased smile bloomed on his face.

“I see. Six hundred and fifty-two large gold coins in such a short amount of time, eh? As far as the remaining regions entrusted to the other officials, the chiefs there would have continued selling their wheat cheaply if you had never identified the problem in the first place. Half of their victory belongs to you. Taking those savings into account, you have already surpassed the one-thousand mark for this country through your efforts.”

Isn’t he being a bit too...no, overly lenient in his judgment? I mean, to include half of his own staff’s calculations into mine? Bertine was startled by his words. But she recalled her father’s words about negotiations like this. *“When someone gives you a bonus for free, you accept it graciously and thank them with a smile.”*

“Then, Your Excellency, will I be permitted to continue living in this country?” she asked.

“Yes. Live your life how you please. I would be a fool to turn away such an outstanding individual. If you desire citizenship, I can offer you that as well.”

“Please! And if you could do the same for Dorothée too, I’d be ever so grateful!”

Cecilio stared intently at Bertine’s face. “Do you truly love this nation so much?”

“I do. I’m not ashamed to admit that I’m absolutely obsessed with its many charms. Not least of which is the amazing variety of your cuisines. Stewed emu, star fruit liquor, dragon’s eggs, roasted ball rabbit. Everything is just out of this world.”

She was so lost in her recounting that when she snapped back to reality, Bertine discovered Cecilio covering his mouth with a hand. He seemed to be struggling to contain himself for some reason.

“Your Excellency?”

“Ahem, apologies, I’m fine. All of those are my favorites and I didn’t realize I was salivating until it was almost too late. Never mind me. Back to what you said. Are you aware that every dish you

mentioned is only offered to those we welcome wholeheartedly? I highly doubt foreigners have even heard of them, considering their attitudes toward the Federation. Which begs the question. How in the world did you manage to worm your way into the chiefs' trust? Is that something you learned how to do in San Luenne as well?"

Bertine realized it would be too cruel of her if she continued withholding the truth from him, so she finally confessed the details.

"Do you remember Evance, the man who lives with me? Well, much to my shock, when we arrived in the Bilva district, I discovered he was Chief Bruno's son. Thanks to him, his father and mother invited me to stay in their home. They treated me to many delicious meals as well as performances of song and dance. While I enjoyed myself on his estate, he sent out his messengers to the other six chiefs and procured their agreement with your edict on my behalf."

"Fascinating. So, he was the chief's son... It truly is a small world, after all."

"Ah, which reminds me. Bianca's father did in fact refuse to cooperate initially, so I visited him myself. Though I had a small tiff with Bianca, her father, Kurt, nevertheless took a liking to me, and in the end, also agreed to sign the pledge."

"You managed to get into the good graces of both Bruno *and* Kurt? Those stubborn old goats? I—"

"Stubborn, you say? I'd have to disagree. I found them quite reasonable."

"Do you have any idea how many years it took for them to trust me? My lady, you must be an outrageous, world-class charmer then. But I really must apologize to you about Bianca. I just realized I never did, considering the lie she fed you about being my fiancée and using it to insult you. Yet again I find myself seeking your forgiveness, for her, as well as my discourtesy to you over your housemate."

Cecilia bowed his head, but Bertine peeked playfully into his face and laughed.

"It's water under the bridge, truly," she said. "We both misunderstood a great deal about each other, Your Excellency. If anything, the original cause of all this discourtesy would be the Kingdom of San Luenne for trying to negotiate the reparations down in the first place. On that note, you truly will allow me to become a citizen of this country, yes?"

“Indeed. I’ll have your official documentation issued today.”

“Then would you like to join me tonight and indulge in star fruit alcohol? I have both the red and yellow varieties, as well as the dried meat of both emus and ball rabbits.”

Cecilio’s face brightened immediately, making him look like a much younger man. “Do you now? Lately, all I’ve had are distilled spirits made from barley and cactus, so I found myself yearning for the fragrant star fruit liquor. Are you certain you don’t mind my company? After all, I’ve been in your debt a great deal lately, especially after the terrible impression you must have had of me.”

“Your Excellency, enough. Did I not say it’s water under the bridge? You’ve apologized for a lifetime’s worth. My lady’s maid, Dorothée, will be more than happy to cook for us as well, so please look forward to tonight. Is seven o’clock all right with you? If you’re busy, eight is fine as well.”

Cecilio didn’t even stop to think about his answer.

“Seven, you say? I’ll be there. Count on it.”

Bertine smiled sunnily, charmed by his boyish eagerness.

Chapter 21: A Feast of Souvenirs and Cecilio's Story

ON the second floor of Bertine's house, preparations were underway for a feast. Dorothée confirmed the process for readying various foods with Meira.

"Lady Meira, I can rehydrate the dried meat by placing it in water, yes?"

"Yes, water is fine, but it will taste even better if you put it in a solution of half water and half spirits."

"That's good to know. Thank you."

Behind them, Diego efficiently ripped strips of dried emu meat.

"Deigo, I'll help you," Bertine offered.

"Much obliged, my lady."

While the lively food prep continued, the doorbell sounded with a *clang* and a voice called up from the first floor.

"Candy ma'am! Are you there?"

"I'm here, David," Bertine said loud enough he could hear. "Did you forget it should be 'candy miss'? Is Camilla with you as well?"

"Yup! I told Mama we're coming here too."

While Bertine had been at the capitol meeting with His Excellency, the two children had rushed over excitedly to her house when they saw Dorothée again. Her maid had invited them to dinner tonight.

The dried meat Evance's parents had gifted her had only been partially dried instead of fully dried to the point of stiffness. They had told her doing it this way retained a sweetness that made it taste even more flavorful. But it also wouldn't keep very long either.

"I feel like I'd receive a divine punishment if I let these delectable souvenirs rot, so let's eat them right away."

Bertine had agreed wholeheartedly with Dorothée's suggestion earlier, and now they used up as much of the emu and ball rabbit meat as they could. Delicious aromas started wafting throughout the house just as seven o'clock arrived. The doorbell downstairs

clanged once more, announcing Cecilio's arrival this time.

"His Excellency is here," Bertine announced.

"Wow! You invited him, candy ma'am?" David asked in awe.

"I did. He's quite excited to taste the flavors of his home again."

Bertine went downstairs to greet him and led him to the second floor, where the two children stared at him, eyes round in surprise.

"He looks just like the painting in Mama's restaurant!"

The children's shock made Bertine smile, but a quick glance toward Meira showed the younger girl frozen.

"Meira, this is..."

"I know who he is," she said. "I mean, I'm honored to make your acquaintance, Your Excellency, Cecilio Bonifaccio!"

"Pleased to meet you, young lady."

"Wow! The Southern Federation's champion is real!"

"I sure hope so."

Bertine found the byplay between them interesting as Cecilio smiled ruefully and Meira stared at him reverently.

"All right, everyone, we just finished cooking. Please eat while everything is still hot."

At Dorothee's announcement, they all took a seat at the table then Bertine gestured for the adults to raise their glasses for a toast.

"Here's to our safe return from the hinterlands and the completion of my task! Cheers!"

"Cheers"!

Hums and murmurs of pleasure filtered throughout the room as each of them took a sip of the star fruit liquor. Cecilio's "Ahhh! How nostalgic!" pleased Bertine especially. Then they all dug into the various dishes in front of them. The first thing the children sampled was the ball rabbit stew.



"This is so yummy!" David exclaimed. "What is this meat?! Candy ma'am, I've never eaten meat this delicious before!"

"David, it's so good!" Camilla cried with joy.

They were both clearly delighted.

"Mmm, the flavor of my birthplace," Cecilio said. "The more I bite into this emu, the more scrumptious it tastes. This ball rabbit is seasoned superbly as well."

"Are you enjoying yourself then, Your Excellency?" Bertine asked.

"I am, a great deal. Thank you for this chance to take a culinary trip down memory lane, Lady Bertine."

"Please, just Bertine. Oh, I've been meaning to ask you about your hometown, Your Excellency. What sort of place is it?"

"My hometown, hm?"

A faraway look entered Cecilio's eyes as he began to speak.

"I come from the southernmost part of this country. I was born and raised in a region where the ocean stretched out in front of us and the mountains behind. We had no shortage of food, but we lacked anything of value to trade in for money. And since we didn't have money, whenever we fell ill, we couldn't rely on medicines. Instead, we depended on the strength of our bodies and luck to recover. Even if an epidemic ran throughout our region inducing dangerously high fevers, the best we could do was cool our foreheads with cloths soaked in water. I love my home and it's a wonderful place, but it's also an impoverished one."

At this point, Meira praised Cecilio for his leadership in the war that led to the Federation's victory, and the conversation turned to Cecilio's reasoning for instigating the war.

"Once I became the leader of this nation, I discovered the depth of the imperial merchants' immorality. All throughout the country, they would lure young men and women, and even children, with promises of work, then sell them off as slaves. What made the situation worse was the presence of honest merchants who actually offered legitimate work. It was difficult to distinguish between the villains and the good ones."

Diego's grim expression and Meira's emphatic nods indicated their familiarity with the issue.

"Catching the perpetrators did nothing to eliminate the enemy's many bases of operations or reduce the number of victims

deceived and sold into slavery,” Cecilio went on. “We asked the Empire countless times to take control of the situation, but they did nothing. So I gave them an official ultimatum: The next time they ignored our appeals, I would take the matter into my own hands. I did just that. I gathered my troops, crossed the border, and destroyed the stronghold of one such slave trader in the Empire who lived near the Federation. Then I took back our citizens who had been caged inside his warehouse like animals. That was the start of the war.”

Bertine questioned him tentatively after listening to his words. “Your Excellency, the Empire didn’t commit their full force to the war?”

“So you know then. You’re right, they did not. The Empire did not send great waves of their army. If they had, we would have undoubtedly lost. But I knew they wouldn’t destroy our army either, so I took a gamble and made the first move by invading.”

Cecilio’s ready assent to Bertine’s question surprised Diego.

“What? But why would the Empire do such a thing?” he asked.

“Bertine, would you like to explain it to him?” Cecilio asked her. “I suspect you know the answer.”

She hurriedly swallowed the stewed meat she’d been chewing on before replying. “I wager it’s food. The Empire understood that annihilating the Federation’s troops would most likely result in famine for its own people. Because over half of this country’s army consists of reserve troops who farm during times of peace. If they died, the Empire would suffer from food shortages for years, perhaps decades.”

“Oh? On what basis did you draw your conclusion?”

Bertine paused for a moment to gather her thoughts then explained her reasoning.

“A few years ago, Father asked me to research the Empire’s production and consumption of wheat. But the Empire doesn’t release official data, so I requested the volumes handled by imperial wheat suppliers from trade associations instead. Naturally, they had mountains of information, which meant I had a challenging time sifting through everything. But I did and learned something strange. No matter how many different calculations I made, the amount of wheat harvested in the Empire was thirty percent less than its expected consumption. I realized right away that the Empire relied heavily on imports from the Federation to make up for the deficit.”

“And what else did you learn?” Cecilio prompted.

“Well, I noticed the Federation was exporting a great deal of other foodstuffs besides wheat as well, especially from its territories bordering the Empire. Vegetables, fruits, and meats, primarily. Because the rate at which the Empire expanded cultivated lands hasn’t kept pace with its population increase. If food imports were to decrease dramatically, the first to perish would be the commoners, who make up ninety-nine percent of the population. And eventually, those commoners would turn their dissatisfaction onto the emperor.”

Cecilio nodded emphatically several times throughout her analysis.

“Exactly right,” he said. “The Empire engaged in a limited war because it still had to uphold its reputation as a major political force in the world. But they knew as well as I did that it wouldn’t be worth it to destroy our troops simply for killing a few slave traders. They had a lot more to lose if they did.”

“Your Excellency, you predicted their every move then?”

He nodded in response to Bertine’s question. “I knew the emperor would panic once we invaded because he never actually expected me to follow through on the threat. Which was why he chose the path of a brief war resulting in defeat. Of course, he would have been unhappy at the perception of being thoroughly routed by a so-called lesser power like us. But he managed to avoid that with a seemingly reasonable stance instead, one of ending the war on the basis of preventing further deaths.

“This was his official position within the Empire, although he knew that his government would have to pay for the slave trading. Despite the law forbidding human trafficking, they had looked the other way for years over the slave traders’ operations. So, they chose to offset their negligence of duty by paying us reparations. I personally wouldn’t have been opposed to the elimination of every slave trader, but logically, I understood that the reparations were necessary for rebuilding our nation.”

Diego picked up the conversation from this point with a thoughtful murmur. “The people always want a war to end as soon as the casualties become their loved ones. This latest one started because of imperial slave traders. A limited war means limited casualties. It allows both sides to withdraw their armies while satisfying the minimum for both sides to save face. As long as the

people are allowed to live in peace, there won't be much of an outcry or demand for protracted war."

"That's right. I was fairly confident events would unfold just so," Cecilio said. "Before I went into battle, I cursed the slave traders to the ends of the earth. I made sure that all the locals on both sides heard me and then I engaged in battle. I knew it wouldn't take long for the rumors to spread after that about the cause of the war."

David and Camilla understood not a word of their discussion, so they cheerfully continued eating. But the other adults couldn't conceal their surprise at Cecilio and Bertine's conversation. Meira was arguably the most stunned of them all because she had never even considered the idea of the Empire holding back its military might.

"From the Empire's perspective, they probably see the war as akin to being bitten by the dog they kept on a leash," Cecilio said. "But they can no longer use the Federation's lands for close to nothing, which they'd been doing for so long. They have yet to realize that the dog is off its leash and determined to stand on equal footing as the owner."

"And we will, Your Excellency," Bertine said. "The battle has just begun because this country will slowly and steadily reveal its real strength to the Empire."

"Bertine, the look on your face might scare the children."

"Oh, my. Whatever do you mean?"

The grown-ups laughed at Bertine when she panicked.

While chewing on emu meat, she thought of her future plan and a sinister smile started spreading on her lips again. It disappeared in a flash when Dorothee admonished her with a "My lady! Your face!"

They all spent the night feasting and chatting cheerfully. Toward the end of the party, Cecilio handed Bertine and Dorothee their certificates of citizenship. He had apparently rushed the officials to get it done before he left the office.

"My lady, does this mean we're only citizens of the Federation now?" Dorothee asked.

"No. While we remain unmarried, we're allowed to be citizens of both San Luenne and the Federation," Bertine explained. "But once we wed, we will automatically become citizens of our respective husbands' countries. Though I have a feeling I'll always

be a citizen of two countries.”

“It does feel awfully special, doesn’t it?”

Dorothée’s earnest remark made the slightly inebriated Bertine laugh delightedly.

Chapter 22: Isabella, David and Camilla's Mother

DAVID'S mother, Isabella, was twenty-three years old. She married at the age of sixteen and was blessed with David not long after. Though their small family was poor, they still managed to live comfortably. Then the death of her husband in the war changed everything in a heartbeat.

Her younger child, Camila, was only three years old, but Isabella had to work in order for her family to survive. It broke her heart to leave her children at home alone while she worked late into the night. The only saving grace was that her current place of employment wouldn't dismiss her should she need time off if her children fell ill. Such flexibility was vitally important for her. So whenever David and Camilla walked to the restaurant because they missed her, she wanted to cry. And whenever she became angry over things that didn't warrant such emotion, she began to hate herself.

Around this time, she learned a woman called the Candy Ma'am lived in their neighborhood. Listening to her children's chatter about the mysterious woman, she had assumed the Candy Ma'am was an elderly lady done raising her own children. Isabella was surprised the day she actually met her, though. The Candy Ma'am turned out to be a young, beautiful woman who exuded a good upbringing. According to the gossip from a few older women in the neighborhood, she was supposedly on the run from the Empire. Which made Isabella wonder what exactly the aristocratic woman had done to flee the imperials.

One day, the woman, whom everyone called Bertie, gave her children a letter addressed to Isabella. When she took the envelope from David, she noted the weight and realized there was something else inside besides the letter. Isabella tipped it over onto her palm and a stylish earring tumbled out.

Dear Isabella,

Thank you for always sharing such delicious food with us. Here's a very small token of my appreciation. It's an earring I made. You have such lovely chestnut-colored eyes, so I used beads and stones of a similar hue to craft this. Please wear them if they tickle your fancy.

And if you find yourself interested in doing this kind of intricate handcraft, would you like to make some? I would be happy to sell them for you in my shop. I would only take 20 percent of the sale price to cover materials, leaving the rest of the 80 for you.

Feel free to ignore this offer should you be too busy to accept it.

*Warm Regards,
Bertie*

Isabella tried on the earrings. Every time she moved her head, she felt the pleasant swing they made.

“Jacob, what do you think? Do they suit me?”

Emotion clogged the back of her throat when she spoke to her beloved husband, who was no longer in this world. It had been a long time since she'd received a letter or worn such a pretty bauble. Isabella couldn't even remember the last occasion someone had complimented her eyes.

“My beauty” had been her husband's pet name for her and he'd used it often, especially when he held her in his arms. But he was no longer here to whisper sweet nothings to her. Ever since his death, she'd been so focused on working and caring for her children, that she paid no attention to her appearance.

In this life that revolved only around her children and job, Isabella sensed that making earrings might bring her a bit of joy.

She usually tied her hair back in a simple bun, but now she tried her husband's favorite style on her, a half-up ponytail. Her lustrous black hair fell in soft waves around her shoulders. In the mirror, she saw a young woman wearing sparkling earrings that matched the color of her eyes.

“If you find yourself interested in this kind of intricate handicraft...” She actually loved such detailed work. Her daily work now consisted of carrying food to tables and cleaning up after customers, but in truth, she used to love knitting things and embroidery as well. Though she'd never made accessories before, she thought she could do it once someone taught her how.

“I want to try my hand at it...”

THE next day, Isabella visited Bertine at a reasonably early hour. Of course, her children accompanied her. Bertine's maid gave them glasses of fruit juice and they happily drank it.

"Would you like to make accessories then?" Bertine asked.

"Yes, but I'm at a loss on the tools and materials."

"Never fear. I'll provide those to you. The cost of the supplies will be deducted from the sale price, but the remaining 80 percent is yours if they sell in the shop."

"Bertie, you won't be able to turn a profit with a split like that."

"For now, no. I'm fine with that though, at least until you learn how to make accessories featuring more intricate designs using higher-quality materials. Once your handmade products start flying off my shelves, that's when I'll take 40 percent instead, so don't worry. I have it all worked out."

Bertie grinned like a mischievous child. Isabella's excitement heightened at the thought of making more complicated, luxurious things.

"I know you're busy, so feel free to make some whenever you have time."

With that, she gave Isabella a variety of items. A leaflet with instructions, materials, a bundle of extremely thin wire, small cutting pliers, beads, and colored stones separated by type in a small dish. Then she provided a brief explanation of everything as well as the process itself.

"Would you like to try making a prototype here?"

"Yes! Please!"

Isabella set to work. Because of her love for fine handicrafts, she sailed smoothly through the steps and finished her first handmade pair of earrings.

"Incredible!" Bertine exclaimed. "Not many are capable of getting it right the first time. I think you have a talent for this, Isabella!"

"Really? I have...a talent for this..."

"Oh, no. Oh, dear. Please don't cry."

"Don't mind me," Isabella sniffled. "It's just been so long since someone praised me like this. To tell you the truth, I've been a bit prone to tears since receiving your letter."

Bertine wrapped both of her hands around Isabella's work-roughened right one. "Isabella, you're amazing," she said. "You

work so hard every day. I'm both admiring and envious of how strong and beautiful your heart is."

"Admire? Envy? Bertie, you shouldn't feel that way toward someone like me. I..."

"Isabella, I'll tell you again and again. You're a strong, wonderful woman with a beautiful heart and a lovely figure. Trust me."

"What? Never say so."

"From now on, I want us to talk every time we meet and soon enough, you'll learn from me what an incredible woman you are. You have your precious memories with your husband and children you want to protect. Unfortunately, I'm destined to have neither."

Seeing Bertine's sad smile, Isabella wondered why the other woman remained unmarried despite them being close in age.

SEVERAL days later, it was Isabella's day off. She was at Bertine's house and she took charge of cooking dinner that night using the abundant ingredients there. Dorothée stood near her, taking notes, her gaze intent on Isabella's every movement.

"I want to learn as much as I can about the Federation's cuisine, you see."

"Dorothée, please teach me later, too," Bertine said.

"Leave it to me, my lady."

That night, Isabelle and her children, along with Bertine, Dorothée, and Diego, spent a lively time eating. She made a few dishes for their dinner. Thickly cut chunks of pork deep-fried in oil. Leafy green vegetables blanched quickly and dressed with a sauce made of chopped nuts, vinegar, nut oil, salt, and garlic. Rounded off by a thick, creamy egg drop soup. The children kept up an energetic chatter from start to middle but were yawning by the time they ate their last bite.

"Thank you for today, Isabella," Bertine said. "I especially enjoyed the fried pork."

"That's my mother's recipe. She learned it from her mother. The trick is to dredge it in a thick layer of spices."

"Oh, your mother's recipe? I don't have any from my own mother, so I'll definitely keep your mother's in mind!" Bertine said.

Once everyone finished eating, Isabella decided it was time to head home. Diego picked up the sleepy Camilla and walked the

three of them back to their house. After watching them go, Bertine turned to Dorothée.

“Dorothée, do you have your mother’s recipes as well?” she asked.

“Yes, but they’re relatively simple. My lady, cooking isn’t the domain of aristocrats, so please don’t feel sad about not having any from your dear mother.”

Dorothée fondly recalled her memories of the late marchioness. A fragile woman with a gentle smile. She had showered her children, Lord Geraldo and Lady Bertine, with affection and loved her husband deeply. A lovely woman whose life had been cut much too short. In her final moments, she had made one last request to Dorothée.

“Dorothée, please take care of my sweet Bertine for me.”

With those words, she departed on her journey to God’s garden.

“Dorothée, is something wrong?” Bertine asked.

“Not at all. I was just lost in thought. I’ll wash the dishes, so please take your bath, my lady. Hurry, or the water Diego heated for you will cool.”

“Are you sure? Then as you wish.”

Tomorrow, Meira would teach them how to dye the fabric. Dorothée silently pledged to herself she would learn everything she could here to support her lady to the best of her ability.

Chapter 23: Intruder

“ALL right then, I’ll explain the dyeing process,” Meira said. “We’re working with silk today, yes, Bertie?”

“That’s right. This thin silk, please.”

In a practiced move, Meira struck the tree bark they had brought with them from her hometown with a wooden mallet. She continued hammering away at it, producing small chips, which were then tossed into a cauldron to boil. Once the liquid turned the right shade of deep, dark red, she dipped a colander into the cauldron and removed the wood chips. She filtered out any remaining pieces of wood with a cotton cloth, then finally placed prewashed silk fabric into the cauldron.

“Turn the heat down low but not low enough to lower the temperature,” she instructed. “Continue churning the fabric in the pot. After you see the dye take to the fabric, you take it out of the pot and wash it.”

Meira used a wooden pole to stir the fabric in the liquid before she lifted it up to check the staining. Once she was satisfied with the color, she pulled out the silk piece and washed the fabric again and again in clean water, changing the water constantly.

“After you finish washing it, soak it in a hot water solution containing alum to prevent the color from fading.”

“Where can I get alum?” Bertine asked.

“Alum crystals are derived from alum stones, which are scattered all across the Federation. We crush the rocks into small pieces, grind it down further into a fine powder, boil it in water, and use the resulting component.”

“This country truly is bountiful in so many resources.”

“Except money,” Meira responded wryly.

When she placed the silk fabric in a pot containing alum solution, the color brightened.

“Amazing. The color actually changed.”

“Yes, alum brightens the red color while a solution of rusted iron dissolved in vinegar darkens it.”

“What a fantastic lesson,” Bertine said. “The process isn’t even that difficult, either.”

“It isn’t, but getting the right color every time is a matter of practice and experience. Depending on the day’s weather, heat, and cold, the color will change a bit. Bertie, are you going to dye the fabric yourself?”

“No. I just thought it would be best if I learned the process first. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be able to sell the dyed fabrics convincingly. Having a grasp of the foundations makes selling easier.”

Dorothee wondered what sort of market her lady planned to create for scarlet silk. Perhaps it was the first step in her grand plan for the future. In any case, she was impatient to find out to whom the scarlet silk was destined to be sold.

“Meira, can you keep this special bark used to create the scarlet dye a secret?” Bertine requested.

“But everyone in the hinterlands knows about it.”

“No, I meant from the imperials. If they learn about this, there’s a very high possibility they’ll cut down many of the trees and take them back to their country. It takes years for them to grow, yes? It would be a huge problem if they cut them down all at once. The other thing the imperials might do is tell your people to grow *only* this tree, which would drive down the value of the beautiful scarlet color. Either way, the imperials would exact a tremendous toll on the lovely forests of the hinterlands.”

Meira tilted her head in confusion. “You think the forest is lovely? I don’t understand what you mean.”

“That’s because you’re used to it. But the imperials, particularly the ones from the north of the Empire, would most definitely think it a paradise.”

“Hm, I think I see what you mean,” Meira said, her brow furrowed in thought.

“Can the dye be boiled down and thickened?” Bertine asked.

“Yes, it can.”

“Then I’ll take a sample of that version with me to an expert and have them dye the silk just like you did, Meira.”

The younger woman deftly cleaned up the area and then spoke. “Would it be all right if I went shopping? My older brother gave me some spending money.”

It was clear that she could barely contain her excitement.

“You wanted to buy lace undergarments, yes? I’ll buy those for you as a gift, so spend your brother’s money on something else you want.”

“Wow! Thank you so much, Bertie!”

Bertine hung the dyed silk piece in the backyard before she asked Dorothée to look after the house while she, Meira, and Diego went shopping on the main boulevard. The three of them left and had a wonderful time browsing the shops. After they returned home, she picked up the dried silk and inspected it.

“This is beautiful. I knew my instincts were right. The scarlet shade is deep, but when the light hits it just right, it looks like gold dust is scattered throughout it. I’ve never seen a fabric this color. Thank you so much, Meira.”

“I never thought about it like that. It’s so familiar to me after all these years that I didn’t view it as anything special.”

Still staring at the fabric, Bertine shook her head in response. “I have no doubt this will become all the rage. It should command a high selling price, too. Meira, would you keep this a secret from your brother as well?”

“I will. I haven’t told him, anyway. All he knows is that I came to Ybit with you to visit, Bertie.”

“I want to make certain that loads of coins are spent in the hinterlands thanks to this long, thin cloth,” Bertine said.

“What? So *you* won’t be the one earring money off this? It’s for the hinterlands?”

“Oh, no, I’ll profit, but so will your people. Commerce only works if everyone involved makes money. Those who will cut down the trees and gather the bark, those who will grow the trees, those who will deliver the materials, the dyers, the dressmakers, the buyers. Everyone will be happy by the time my idea is in motion.”

Bertine suddenly remembered her mother’s words. A smile graced her face when she recounted them. “‘A dress must make everyone involved in the process happy. A dress with one person’s misfortune woven into it won’t make the wearer happy.’ I learned this from my mother, and she learned it from her mother when she was a child.”

Her mother’s family dealt extensively in fabrics, women’s clothing, and men’s clothing. She and her parents, Bertine’s grandparents, had taken great care of both their employees and customers. “Business is only good when everyone is happy.” That

had been her mother's family's favorite saying. They were sometimes criticized for their naive approach to commerce. But Bertine's father had thought otherwise.

"Bertine, let me tell you something important. My marriage to Karina, your mother, was arranged by our parents. Nevertheless, we were happy. The first time we met, I fell in love with her instantly because I realized she'd been raised to be a good person."

He had confided this to Bertine on the first anniversary of her mother's death. His face had been extremely gentle at the time. In the Kingdom of San Luenne, where money was everything, Bertine was proud of her mother's family's integrity and her father, who fell in love with it. So she wanted to do business like they did.

BUT an incident forced Bertine to confront the fact that there were people who didn't have the same mindset as hers. It happened when Bertine and Dorothée visited a long-established dye shop. The person in charge was a young man who had just taken over the business from his father. He took one look at the silk Meira had dyed and insisted on knowing how to create the dye.

"I apologize, but it's a secret," Bertine insisted. "Now then, if you would kindly dilute this concentrated liquid to a third of its potency and dye this fabric, I would really appreciate it."

The young man persisted for quite a while before he finally backed down. But the next night, a suspicious person entered Bertine and Dorothée's house.

LATE at night.

"My lady, my lady."

"Hm? What's wrong?"

Bertine jerked awake at Dorothée's subdued whisper.

"There was a suspicious sound downstairs. Diego just went down to check."

"Understood."

Bertine immediately stepped into her slippers then opened a long, narrow box she'd brought from her home in San Luenne. A rifle lay tucked inside. Ten bullets could be loaded quickly through a hole in the side of the barrel. Pushing the lower lever forward

then pulling it back loaded the rounds for firing. Bertine took a single deep breath before going out into the hallway.

A violent sound came from further down the hallway. Diego and the thief were fighting.

“Stay here.”

After she instructed Dorothée, Bertine shut the door to her bedroom and walked cautiously down the hallway. She raised the butt of the rifle to her right shoulder, ready to fire at a moment’s notice. Without making a sound, she descended the stairs a step at a time.

The moonlight filtering in through the window gave her glimpses of the battle unfolding within her shop. Diego fought two masked men. Standing near the top of the stairs, Bertine aimed for an intruder’s right shoulder and pulled the rifle trigger.

Bang! The hollow sound of the bullet rushing reached her ears at the same time she flinched from the rifle’s recoil against her shoulder. But her aim was true as the bullet found its mark in the intruder’s shoulder. She immediately pumped the lower lever back and forth, ejected the empty shell casing, and took up her firing stance once more.

The man collapsed, pressing his wounded shoulder as he writhed on the floor. His companion was startled by the sudden sound of the gun firing. He kept his knife brandished in Diego’s direction and helped the fallen man stand up before they both fled.

Diego didn’t give chase because Bertine’s safety was his top priority. Especially if the villains still had friends prowling the property.

Their neighbors were awoken by the sudden sound of gunfire in the dead of night and rushed to the house. It was a huge commotion. Diego shouted, “The garrison! Summon the garrison!” in the Federation’s official language to the people gathering.

“My lady! Are you hurt?!”

“Dorothée, I’m fine,” Bertine assured her. “I hope the lesson I gave them was enough to give up on trespassing into our house ever again. Diego, what about you?”

“Just some scratches and bruises,” he said. “My lady, it gladdens me to know you’re as skilled as ever with a rifle.”

“Well, I certainly never imagined the day would come when my marksmanship practice paid off. What a dangerous situation that was.”

After explaining the situation to the garrison, who came rushing in, Diego spent the night in the shop as a precaution. Bertine apologized to the neighbors for disturbing them before returning to her bed.

While she slept, the garrison informed Cecilio of the incident, including details of the rifle, a rare commodity in this country.

Chapter 24: A Request for Marmalade and Jam

THE day after the thieves skulked into her house, Bertine was in Cecilio's office.

"And then you shot your rifle?" Cecilio asked.

"Yes, I did," Bertine said. "There were two of them, and if I hadn't, Diego likely would have been killed."

"Where did you get the rifle?"

"Father had one of his private soldiers visit the Azdal Monarchy to purchase it. The rifle was part of my bridal coffer."

"A rifle as a bridal gift..."

Surprised, Cecilio seemed to be on the verge of laughing. But he realized it would be rude if he did, so he suppressed the urge, resulting in a strangely strained expression on his face. Bertine noticed it and tilted her head in amusement at him.

If I had actually married her, would she have hunted me down with the rifle every time we fought? When the unbidden thought flashed through his mind, Cecilio could no longer contain himself and started chuckling. He forced himself to cough to cover up his inappropriate reaction.

The Azdal Monarchy lay beyond the mountain range on the Empire's western edge. It specialized in weapons production. Because of the towering mountains between them, the Monarchy's relationship with the Empire was limited and it had no contact at all with the Southern Federation. Cecilio himself had never actually seen a rifle with his own eyes. He only knew of it from what others had told him.

"Intriguing. Then you're familiar with its usage?" he asked.

"Yes. It's said a weapon functions only as well as its user's skill, so I practiced a great deal with it," Bertine confessed. "If I hadn't chased them out like I did, they would have hurt me in an attempt to find out the raw materials for the dye. Then once I told them, their business with me would have been over, and they wouldn't have had any qualms about killing me after. It was their

mistake for underestimating me just because I'm a woman."

Cecilio nodded, his face grim, then turned to Ignacio. "What do you know so far of the dye maker?"

"We're still investigating. The owner of that particular business died three years ago. His son took over, but by all reports, he's not particularly good at the work. According to his neighbors, he's been losing customers since he took over the business and is accumulating debt. We believe he hired the assailants in a desperate attempt to recover his financial fortunes. All physicians in the capital have been asked to notify us of any patients with an injured right shoulder.

"Noted. Keep looking into the situation, then."

Once Ignacio left the room, Cecilio turned back to Bertine.

"Bertine, I'd like you to limit your daring ventures to business negotiations only. But I doubt you'll acquiesce, will you?"

"Your Excellency, I was taught to protect myself and my property against bandits by any means necessary."

Cecilio rubbed the spot between his eyebrows and hung his head in thought. "I don't necessarily disagree with that sentiment. But..."

He muttered the last word, still thinking. Then he raised his head and stared at Bertine worriedly. Cecilio decided not to tell her how unexpectedly shaken he'd been when he learned at dawn that she'd been attacked in the night.

"By any means necessary, hm..." he repeated.

"I took the correct action, especially because Diego is under my care," Bertine said, her voice firm.

Cecilio stood up and exhaled deeply, staring out the window for some time. Seemingly coming to an internal conclusion, he returned to his chair.

"You truly believe you were targeted for the dye ingredients?" he asked.

"I do. After Meira taught me the dyeing process, I went to that shop and asked them to dye a piece of cloth with a concentrated version of the dye. When the proprietor saw it, he would not stop asking me about its ingredients. He was incredibly persistent. I was unpleasantly surprised by his behavior since the business seemed respectable."

"Is the dye truly so rare?"

"Yes, it is. The shade is a stunning one I'd never seen until my

visit to the hinterlands. I know the imperials will pay handsomely for anything stained with the color. Although I never imagined I would be attacked for it either.”

Cecilio tapped the top of his sturdy desk with the tip of his middle finger, deep in thought for a few moments.

“You certainly have an eye for things,” he said. “That dance has been performed for me on countless occasions, but I had no inkling the dyed fabric could be valuable enough to kill for.”

“Well, my mother’s family dealt in the clothing business, so I learned from her.”

“If it really is worth so much, then this country must do what it can to safeguard the dye’s secrets, no?”

Bertine unthinkingly clenched her fist. “I agree. You read my mind, because I was about to ask you to do just that. If imperial merchants learn about it, the tree will be overexploited for its bark. They might even demand the Federation increase its growth.”

“I’m not keen on either of those options.”

“We must make sure to maintain the right balance of supply and demand, or we risk lowering its value drastically, thereby reducing the profits the people of the hinterlands will see from its manufacture and sale. The dye is too important and beautiful to be a short-lived fad. Your Excellency, I believe I have a great idea.”

“Let me stop you right there because the first thing we need to do is find a dye maker who’s trustworthy.” Cecilio started making notes. “Right, then, tell me this plan of yours.”

“Of course. I would like an imperial noblewoman, particularly one who possesses strong influence amongst her peers, to buy textiles dyed in that special scarlet. We’ll constrict the point of sale to her and her connections alone. Meaning anyone else who wishes to buy the fabric would be forced to go through her. In short, this woman would become the bridge of commerce for this product between this country and the Empire.”

“I take it you have a specific woman in mind?”

Bertine puffed with pride in response. “I do indeed. Though it irritates me, I can’t deny there’s a good reason San Luenne is mocked as a remora feeding off the Empire and I just happen to be a product of its environment. Your Excellency, I’ll make sure to sell it at an exorbitant price, so please wait patiently while I do what’s necessary. The Federation stands to gain a great deal. You’ll see.”

“Understood. Now for a change of topic, Bertine.”

“Yes, Your Excellency?”

“Can you leave the rifle in Diego’s hands henceforth?”

“No, I cannot, because I’m the better shot.”

Cecilio slumped in disappointment at Bertine’s blunt response.

SEVERAL days later, Cecilio introduced Bertine to a dye maker he trusted. Bertine handed off a single length of fabric for him to dye in the special scarlet. She stared at it now, after having retrieved her order from the artisan.

“What do you think, Meira?” she asked.

“It’s absolutely perfect. That’s a merchant in Ybit for you, to be able to dye it without any issues. Which means my work here is done, yes?”

“Then you’ll be returning to the Bilva district?”

“I will. The big city is fun and all, but it made me realize I’m much more suited for life back home.”

“I would so love to visit Bilva again,” Bertine said.

“Already? You only just came back here,” Meira laughed.

Bertine found it curious, too. She loved Bilva more than San Luenne and she’d spent most of her twenty-four years in her homeland. The deep forests and gently flowing river. Fruit trees growing lushly all throughout, where all she had to do was stretch her hand out to pick a fruit. She yearned for Bilva.

“I might have been born in the wrong place, you know,” she said.

“Then you should come visit us whenever you want, Bertie,” Meira said.

“I feel awful asking you for this favor after you’ve said such lovely words to me.”

“Tell me.”

“I’d like to bottle marmalade out of the fruits grown in Bilva.”

Bertine arranged a number of bottles of imperial marmalade sold in Ybit.

“Wow, they’re so pretty.”

“The labels are stylish too, don’t you think?”

“They are. Makes me hungry just looking at them.”

“Have at it. I bought enough for you to take each different kind as a souvenir.”

Doing as Bertine asked, Meira sampled all the different flavors

of thick marmalades and jams, like apple and cranberry.

"I wonder if we can make these out of star fruit and dragon's eggs too?"

"You should be able to. I think it would be a fun experiment, to see what kind of textures you can create with fruit just by applying different degrees of heat. So what do you say to going into business with me on these?" Bertine asked. "You said you were keen on earning your money to spend how you like, yes?"

Meira grinned and replied without hesitation. "I say yes, and I am. I can't believe I have the chance to become financially independent while living in the home I love. I feel like I'm dreaming."

"Fantastic! Then I'll pack enough glass bottles and sugar to send with you. Oh, and of course, I'll write down the instructions on how to make both marmalades and jams. You can make them on your own or have your friends help you. The first step is to try the process and see what comes of it."

"I'm so excited, Bertie!"

LATER that same day, the two of them along with Dorothee went into Ybit's shopping district. There, they purchased a large quantity of the materials and equipment necessary for making marmalades and jams, enough to fit a whole wooden crate for Meira to take on her journey home. When they got back to the house, Dorothee demonstrated the marmalade-making process while Bertine pointed out things to be careful of.

"I'll design labels that will appeal to the imperials' sensibilities. What do you think about splitting the net profits 60-40 for you?" Bertine suggested.

"You would give me 60 percent? Are you sure, Bertie?"

"I don't think the net profits will be that high after we deduct the expenses for transportation, merchants' portion, bottles, labels, sugar, fuel, and the fruit itself. But yes, I do want you to have 60 percent because I want as much money as can be spared to go to Bilva."

Meira pondered Bertine's proposal for a while. "Bertie, the fruit trees can grow even without our interference and we can use dead and fallen branches from the forest for fuel."

"I leave it to your discretion. The more we can reduce the

expenses, the better our profits will be.”

“Hehehe. If our marmalades and jams sell well, do you think I’ll earn enough to buy even imperial-made cosmetics?”

“Absolutely!”

“Wow. Then I’ll do my best! I’m positive my mother will want to help too.”

With the wooden crate and her luggage packed in her hired carriage, Meira departed for the hinterlands. Watching her go, Bertine wondered if six months would be enough for the younger woman to produce viable products through trial and error.

The round-trip distance between Ybit and Bilva was over three weeks. Despite that though, not two months later, she received a variety of fruit marmalades. A letter accompanied the wagonload.

“It turns out I was right about my mother being eager to help. But she wasn’t the only one. The other women in the area also pitched in, and in our frenzied obsession making them, it didn’t take long to fill up all the bottles. Please send us the next batch of glassware and sugar as soon as you can. Everyone said they can’t wait to make even more.”

After she finished reading Meira’s letter, Bertine noticed the delivery included jams too. She had told Meira to try her hand at them once she became more confident with the marmalades. Inspecting the jars, she saw that the jams had been made how she taught Meira. Not a hint of mold on any of them either.

“Dorothée, do you think I should inform His Excellency of our newest venture?” Bertine asked.

“Yes. I’m sure he’ll be delighted to hear the news.”

Bertine had created the labels quite some time ago. The first thing she and Dorothée did upon receiving the shipment was to boil wheat flour to make glue. Once it was finished, they worked diligently to paste the labels to the glass bottles, making sure the labels matched the contents.

The marmalades and jams weren’t just limited to star fruit and dragon’s eggs. There was the kalul, a grape-like fruit whose flesh was bright red all the way through. Landswin, with its white fruit covered by a fuzzy skin. And others Bertine didn’t recognize.

Bertine gathered a few samples in preparation for her visit to Cecilio’s office, both to taste and to ask him the names of the fruits she didn’t know. Before Diego left for his errands, she asked him to stop by Cecilio’s office and request when would be a good time for

her to come. When Diego came back, he told her His Excellency said she could come whenever she wanted. Bertine asked one of the women in her neighborhood to look after her shop and left for Cecilio's office.

Chapter 25: Market Demand

CECILIO stared at the bottles lined up on the table reserved for visitors in his office.

“Bertine, I haven’t had the fruits of the hinterlands in so long, yet here you come bearing so many of them. I’m reminded so strongly of my home now.”

“I wanted us to taste them before I put them up for sale. Also, there’s a few whose names I don’t know. If you can spare Ignacio some time as well, why don’t we invite him to join us in the taste-testing?” she suggested.

“Might I ask my other subordinates as well? I think they’d all appreciate a taste of home since these fruits can’t be found in Ybit,” he asked her hesitantly.

“Yes, of course, please do. I’ve brought bread, saltines, and cheese with me as well, so would you kindly have some tea prepared?”

THIRTY minutes later, Cecilio’s office was crowded as burly men stood around enjoying the sweet, delicious contents of the bottles. They told Bertine the names of the fruits she didn’t know while consuming the impromptu feast.

“Ahhh, how nostalgic!”

“I had no idea this could become so velvety in jam form.”

“The fact that these sweet fruits pair well with both bread and cheese is mind-boggling...”

“Superb! This is superb! I’d love to use this jam instead of sugar in my tea! What a heavenly aroma that would create!”

“Your Excellency, where can I buy this?”

Everyone had a spoonful from each bottle and they all showcased their collective dismay when the bottles were emptied.

“I’m sorry, men, but it seems these are bound for sale in the Empire,” Cecilio informed them.

“Whaaat? Miss, please consider selling these in Ybit as well.”

“Then I’ll have my business partner make more for just that,” Bertine said.

“I can’t wait!”

Bertine was surprised by the incredibly favorable reception. She didn’t think they were paying her lip service either because a few of the men were so unwilling to believe they couldn’t have more that they scraped the bottoms of the jars for any remaining morsels. Even Cecilio wasn’t immune. He was very slowly and carefully eating his piece of bread topped with a thin slice of cheese and fruit marmalade.

“Another ingenious idea from you, Bertine,” Cecilio said. “I never would have thought to bottle the fruits from the south of the Federation.”

“They’re delicious and plentiful. During my time there, I learned from Bruno and the others how extra quantities were used as feed for the livestock. So I thought it was a real shame they couldn’t be exported to the Empire, considering how easily they bruise and rot after ripening. Since none of these fruits are cultivated in the Empire, I thought they would sell extremely well.”

“You really are a shrewd dynamo, Bertine.”

The other men in the room nodded emphatically in agreement, a few still licking their spoons wistfully.

“As we’re on the topic, Your Excellency, would you happen to know of a strong market for our initial product offering?” Bertine asked.

“Hmmm, let me see... A wagon that transports raw gemstones to the north of the Empire leaves from Ybit once a month.”

“Does it have enough room to load a shipment of these bottles?”

“It’s possible, but why don’t you sell them in the imperial capital instead of having them taken all the way to the north?”

After finishing the last specks of all the bottles, the other men in the room thanked them for the feast and left Cecilio’s office. Bertine hesitated in answering his question while collecting the empty bottles on a tray. Cecilio picked up on it and pressed her.

“Does the imperial capital pose a problem for some reason?”

“Not quite. I was just thinking about how I’d explain myself if I ran into acquaintances there and they started asking questions about why I was selling bottled goods.”

“Ah, that could pose an issue. Then how about this? I’ll make

you this country's Special Envoy for the Sale of Local Specialties."

"And I may use that as my official title abroad?" she asked.

"You can even add that you report directly to the leader of the Federation in your position. I'll create official documentation for you right now, something small enough you can carry on your person."

"Thank you so much, Your Excellency. That would be a great help."

Once Cecilio handed her the simple but official card, Bertine stood up.

"Sir, I'll make sure to sell every last jar of fruit and the scarlet fabric, too! Thank you again for the audience. This is where I take my leave."

In her excitement, Bertine forgot the manners of her upbringing and somewhat gracelessly rushed from his office. Ignacio smiled in amusement as they watched her go, then spoke to Cecilio.

"Your Excellency, she's changed a great deal, hasn't she? While she waited for your return at your manse, she seemed nothing more than an ordinary noblewoman."

"I thought the same thing, Ignacio. Every time I see her, I feel as if she's grown even more strong-willed. What say you?"

"I concur. If someone told me now that she was actually the daughter of some fearless chieftain, I would believe them."

Cecilio barked a laugh because the description fit her perfectly.

"Speaking of, my lord, the dye maker responsible for the attack on Lady Bertine confessed to his crime," Ignacio reported. "He did indeed want to know what the dye was made of. We also received a message from a physician about an injured man matching the description we sent out, so he and his partner are also in custody."

"Good. It seems I was right to think the dye needs to be safeguarded and quite closely at that."

"I've also increased the night patrol in Lady Bertine's neighborhood."

"Many thanks."

BERTINE returned home and fixed her handmade labels to the jars of fruits she now knew the names of. When she finished pasting

them all, she started packing the jars into a multitude of boxes, using chopped wheat straw as cushioning.

“Does this mean we have a sales channel, my lady?”

“Yes, the imperial capital. Dorothée, do you remember the restaurant in the imperial capital? The one we used to eat in twice a year as a family when Mother was still alive?”

“I do. The large white one facing the capital’s main boulevard, yes?”

“Yes. That will be my first stop. I’m going to ask them if they’ll buy some of the bottles. I’m hoping they say yes and order twenty or thirty of them.”

“I think there’s a good chance they will, considering how large it is.”

THE next day, with Diego driving the carriage, Bertine and Dorothée departed for the imperial capital, boxes of glass bottles ready for sale. They stopped for the night at an inn on the way before resuming their journey the day after and soon enough arrived safely at their destination.

“Every time I come here, I can’t help being awed by the capital’s beauty,” Bertine remarked. “This place was untouched by the war.”

“I heartily agree, my lady. Oh, isn’t that the restaurant over there?”

“You’re right, it is! Diego, we’re heading toward that large white building.”

“Understood.

Diego stopped at the restaurant’s stable and they disembarked from the coach, looking up at the building. Bertine hadn’t been back here with her family since her mother died, but her childhood memories were clear. Her mother had loved this restaurant. When Bertine opened the door, a woman arrived immediately to greet them.

“Would you happen to have a table for two? We don’t have a reservation, unfortunately.”

“Of course. Please follow me.”

Bertine and Dorothée sat down at the table.

“My lady, this is my first time actually eating here. I’m so nervous.”

“Don’t be. You’re my family now. Just be confident and act like you belong.”

While they chatted, the manager of the establishment walked so quickly to greet them that he almost slid across the floor.

“Welcome, Lady Bertine! It’s been quite a while since your last visit. I don’t know if you remember me, but I’m Cefirino, now the manager of this restaurant.”

“Oh, Cefirino, yes! You have a good memory. I think the last time I was here, you were still a...”

“An assistant manager, yes. The former manager retired, and I was promoted. You’ve grown up to be such a lovely young woman, my lady. Do you have any preferences for your meal today? If you do, I’d be happy to have my staff arrange a special course for you.”

“Oh, no, that won’t be necessary, especially because my father isn’t with me today.”

“It wouldn’t be any trouble at all, so please leave your meal to me.”

“Oh, well, then, thank you.”

Bertine gave in to his cheerfully high-handed insistence, though she wondered why he went to such great lengths for her. After all, this was her first visit in ten years. Even when she’d been coming here twice a year with her family, they hadn’t been treated as especially valuable customers.

The dishes were brought out to them one after another. Each and every one was a luxurious affair and she worried about the final cost. Dorothee was completely overwhelmed by the mountain of delectable food.

“I won’t have any regrets now, even if I die tomorrow.”

They ate until their stomachs were pleasantly full. While drinking their post-meal tea, the manager once more approached, asking their thoughts on the meal. Bertine assured him of how fantastic everything was, thanked him and his staff for their graciousness, then took the opportunity to broach the subject of the products she’d brought with her.

“I see. Marmalades and jams made from fruits grown in the Southern Federation...”

“That’s right. I’ve been tasked directly by His Excellency as the Special Envoy for the Sale of Local Specialties. Won’t you consider buying five or ten jars and putting them on display in this corner? I would so appreciate doing business with you.”

Bertine tempered her words with a timid smile, worried her request would be taken as shameless. She needn't have been, though.

"In that case, my lady, we'll buy the entire lot," Cefirino replied.

"The entire lot?! I have twenty boxes packed tightly with the products. I couldn't possibly ask you to buy all twenty of them."

"Never fear. We can use them in our dessert menu or sell them in bulk to other shops we've built relationships with. Please tell me the total price."

Bertine hesitated because the discussion was going remarkably well. She remembered her father's words, spoken often. *"If something feels wrong in the course of a negotiation, listen to your instinct and pause for a moment. Analyze the situation carefully."*

"My lady? The price? And would the products be loaded on your carriage?"

"Cefirino, pardon my rudeness, but why are you being so generous? I realize we used to frequent this restaurant quite often when I was younger. Except I haven't been here in over ten years now. I can't even say that we were special guests at all in the past."

The manager froze for a second, his expression troubled. "Because you're one of our most important customers, my lady. Now, then, please tell me the total and I'll prepare the payment at once."

He was unperturbed by her protest and did as he said. He bought all twenty boxes of marmalades and jams. Four hundred jars altogether. After thanking him for his purchase, Bertine wanted to pay for their meal, which turned out to be shockingly inexpensive.

"That's impossible. It can't be this cheap," she said.

"Just think of it as the managerial discount."

They argued back and forth for a few moments, before Bertine reluctantly conceded defeat and paid him an amount she would have at a Federation restaurant. Thanking him again, she and Dorothee walked out of the establishment, heading back to their carriage.

There, she noticed that all the boxes had been carried in by the restaurant's staff. Diego, who'd been waiting for them with the vehicle, thanked her for the sumptuous lunch pack the restaurant had given him. She realized his meal had also been grand, different from the simpler affair she had arranged for him.

“No matter how I look at it, this is all just too strange.”

Bertine couldn't shake off her suspicions about this bizarre series of events, despite receiving proper payment for the goods. Still confused, she nevertheless asked Diego to take them to the hotel she used to stay at with her family in the past.

Chapter 26: A Reunion After Seven Years

STOMACHS full, they headed to the hotel that featured prominently in Bertine's childhood memories. Of course, she hadn't made a reservation here either. Her plan had been to visit as many different grocers as she could and sell a few bottles here and there. Only after making her rounds did she intend to choose a place to stay for the night.

The hotel she used to stay at with her family twice a year was still very much a high-class one. During those halcyon days, her family would stay in their best suite because her mother had loved the design and furniture inside. Now that Bertine was here, she would request a normal room reserved for travelers.

But when she wrote down her name at the reception desk, the young woman who manned it started in surprise and an older man replaced her.

"The room you used to stay in is available tonight. We can prepare it for you right away."

He was clearly referring to their best suite.

"Thank you, but a normal room is more than enough for us," Bertine said.

"Unfortunately, all of our double-occupancy rooms are fully booked. Naturally, we'll charge you that rate for our best suite, so please do avail yourselves of it."

Bertine was baffled. Why would they treat her this lavishly when she hadn't stayed in this hotel in over ten years? It was the same situation as the restaurant earlier. The doubts in her mind loomed larger about this entire situation.

The suite he led her to was an extravagant one boasting three bedrooms. She hadn't even had the chance to protest before the man had peremptorily turned away, expecting her small entourage to follow.

"Please enjoy your stay with us."

Then the man left.

Bertine surveyed the room and noticed the wallpaper remained

the same from when her mother was still alive—a white-rose pattern. The rose-pink cloth-covered sofa her mother had loved. Her mother’s favorite linen bedding.

This room looks like it was arranged for Mother’s preference, but that’s impossible. They have no reason to do such a thing. The idle thought flashed through her mind while she continued inspecting the suite. Then Dorothee spoke, beaming.

“This room resembles your mother’s chambers. I see that hasn’t changed. Perhaps the late marchioness modeled her suite after this one?”

Dorothee’s words suddenly prompted Bertine to enter the bathroom, wherein the scent of her mother’s favorite herbs greeted her. She picked up the sachet resting on the windowsill and sniffed. The combined scents of lavender, rosemary, and white rose drifted up. Which only deepened her suspicions. Because this blend too closely resembled the one she and her mother had created through a process of trial and error. Or perhaps she was overthinking this situation?

“Dorothee, Diego, I’m going to step out for a moment, but I won’t be long.”

So saying, Bertine raced out of the suite. She practically flew down the hallway, and when she neared the galley, she saw a young girl wearing a brand-new uniform mopping the floor. She was startled to see Bertine.

“Miss, the kitchen is just past here.

“Are you new here?” Bertine asked.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Is your manager working tonight?”

“Yes.”

“Would you please summon him then?”

“Here, miss?”

“Hm, you have a point. Then, please ask him to come see me in the cafe on the first floor. Please tell him it’s urgent.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Before the girl could ask her name, Bertine slipped away to the first-floor cafe. She found a seat facing the entrance and sat down.

“Would you please mix a bit of sweet liquor into my tea?” Bertine requested of the waiter who came to her table. Then she returned to her intent scrutiny of the entrance. A few moments later, the waiter brought her the tea she ordered. Bertine continued

her vigil while sipping it. And then, a man, clearly having rushed here, looked around frantically as if he was searching for someone.

Bertine froze when she saw the man, most likely the manager she had requested a meeting with. His gaze found her at the same time and he too went still. For several seconds, they stared at each other, then the man strode swiftly toward her seat.

“Bertie, it’s been a while, no? Seven years, I think.”

“It has indeed, Luca,” she greeted. “So *you* are the manager. Please, have a seat. We were seventeen when we parted, so yes, for seven years we haven’t seen each other. Was it you who prepared the best suite for us? How long have you been working here? Why did you disappear without a single word?”

Before Bertine’s engagement to Andrew at the age of nineteen, she had been set to wed Luca when she was seventeen. But a short while before their engagement was to be formally announced, his family’s enterprise failed and they all vanished without a word. Two years later, her father chose Andrew as her future husband, yet that had never materialized either because of the king’s order to send her to the Federation.

His smile a bit stiff, Luca responded to her barrage of questions.

“First, the suite. I wasn’t the one who arranged for you to stay in it. I never would have expected to see you here, least of all a spontaneous visit on your own. You can imagine my shock at seeing you then. Second, the matter of my employment. I started working here not long after my family went bankrupt, dashing all hope of an engagement with you. And third. Once my family went bankrupt, we had to disappear from San Luenne with all due haste. If I contacted you, I was afraid I’d place you in danger. So, I didn’t.”

Bertine’s head was a muddled mess of even more questions she wanted to ask him. But the first thing she needed to do was protect the servant girl she had met.

“Please don’t reprimand the girl I spoke to. I deliberately approached her because I suspected she was new and she would do what I ask without much hesitation.”

“I knew as much the moment I saw you. Since I’d taken pains to tell the other staff members to inform you the manager was out of the office if you had asked after me,” Luca said with a strained smile.

“Why? Under whose command? You can’t be doing any of this

yourself,” Bertine realized.

Luca remained silent.

“Tell me something. Is my father the owner of this hotel? If he is, then it would explain a lot. Like the fact that as soon as the receptionist saw my name, her attitude changed. Or being given the best suite without my say-so. And that suite itself being decorated according to my mother’s preferences. Or you, who suddenly disappeared from San Luenne, working here. Everything would make sense if that were the truth.”

Luca said nothing. So Bertine decided to trick him into admitting it.

“Cefirino at the restaurant confessed, you see.”

“He did? Why would he do that? He should know better.”

“Ah-ha, so my father owns the restaurant as well.”

“Damn it, Bertie! I should have known you’d try something.”

She ignored his comment and pressed him further. “Father hid his ownership of both the hotel and restaurant from me. Why? There’s still so much more I want to know. Only two weeks before my wedding, the king ordered me to marry the leader of the Federation. But His Excellency rejected the offer before I even left the Kingdom, and the royal family knew. Yet Father wasn’t informed. Luca, please, do you know what’s behind my being sent to the Federation? You must, because you’re still in contact with my father.”

Luca stared at Bertine’s face for some time then steeled himself before replying.

“Your father is such an outstanding businessman that his nickname is the Alchemist. Anything the marquess touched would turn to gold, so all of his business enterprises always succeeded, and the House of du Jeanne’s fortunes steadily rose.”

“I know all of this,” Bertine said. “The royal family appointed him to take charge of the country’s finances because of his talent and ultimately made him chancellor as well. What of it?”

“Correct. But the marquess was *too* good at what he did.”

From there, Luca told Bertine about the relationship between her father and the royal family, one which she had no idea existed.

The current king of San Luenne was a man with a calm personality, but he lacked business acumen. Her father, Marquess Maxim du Jeanne, had aided him with the country’s finances since the king was the crown prince. For years, they had gotten along

well. But once the king married the queen and her father became chancellor around this time as well, the tensions between the two men grew until they no longer saw eye to eye.

Because the queen was a cunning, greedy woman intent on increasing the royal family's coffers. She ordered Bertine's father to increase the royal family's private wealth, but over the years, she became concerned that he was too good at his job as the chancellor.

"The queen wanted to keep using the chancellor's talent, but she was afraid of him growing too powerful," Luca explained. "So powerful that *he* would control the royal family instead. I believe she wanted to avoid such a situation at all costs. Because the greedy assume others share their greed, too. Never mind the fact that the marquess gave up a considerable number of his businesses to devote himself to his public duties after he was appointed chancellor!"

Luca continued relating to her the sordid tale. When the queen discovered that Bertine would be engaged to Luca, the oldest son of a prominent wealthy merchant in San Luenne who also happened to be an earl, she loathed the thought of the chancellor gaining more power through his new connection with his in-laws. So, she used her authority to crush Luca's family. This happened just before Bertine and Luca's engagement would have been formalized.

Back then, Luca's father had been in the midst of a large construction project in the Empire. And then rumors started spreading. "That family is in danger of losing its financing. This information came from a particular aristocrat close to them, so there's no doubt it's true." Upon hearing these rumors, all of the earl's investors pulled out of the project. So Luca's father invested his own money into the venture to continue construction while searching for new backers. But he couldn't find a single one. His funds finally ran out and construction was halted.

Imperial contractors salvaged any remaining building materials and demanded compensation for work done until that point. The earl was forced to sell off his property, land, and all of his other assets in San Luenne to pay them.

"Father just couldn't understand where all these baseless rumors were coming from, and how far they'd spread. He collapsed from the stress. Then, when our business went completely bankrupt, he died. I think he died of a broken heart, you know. Having lost our home and on the brink of our family falling apart, your father was the one who came to us with a helping hand."

After that, the marquess arranged for Luca's employment in this hotel. The manager at the time gave him a strict but thorough education. While he worked, he continued investigating the rumors that had led to his family's demise and his father's death. He finally learned the identities of the people who had spread the lies and discovered their connections to the queen's family. Luca had realized the true mastermind was most likely the queen herself. But he lacked proof.

"Then my sudden so-called betrothal to the Federation's leader..." Bertine ventured.

"Yes, most likely at the queen's command," Luca nodded gravely. "It might be too late to say this now considering everything I've told you, but His Majesty himself isn't actually that intelligent."

"Which means the royal family could have paid the thousand large gold coins."

"Of course. It was well within their means, considering your father is responsible for building up so much of their current fortune. The family you were supposed to marry into this time, the earl is something of a financial wizard himself too. So the queen moved again to make certain that another powerful house couldn't align with yours. Instead of killing your father, she wants to keep him alive on a leash, but impotent, unable to truly fulfill his potential."

"Oh, my God..."

But wait. If her father truly was the owner of that enormous restaurant and this hotel, he could have sold both to raise the necessary funds to pay off the shortfall in the reparations. So why had he allowed her to be sent to the Federation?

Luca seemed to have read Bertine's mind from her dismayed expression and went on to explain the marquess's thinking.

"Bertie, your father was afraid of the royal family using even you as just another tool in their money-making schemes. If you had remained in San Luenne, the queen would have eventually learned of your value. And she would have made certain you spent the rest of your life under the prince's thumb, working for him—for them. Which was why he agreed to send you as a bride to the Federation. It broke his heart to do such a thing, but it was the only way he could protect you."

"Stop. I don't understand. What do you mean by my *value*?"

Luca's expression was troubled as he stared at Bertine.

“You’ve always been so oblivious, which just adds to your charm. The marquess must have sheltered you a great deal, eh? Here’s the rest of the truth, Bertie. You were raised by the marquess, privileged to receive a special education by the man known as the Alchemist himself. *He* recognized your talents early on and nurtured them because you’re destined to be his successor, the next Alchemist.”

Chapter 27: A Blaze of Fury and Dalila

“**THAT** was the second time the queen interfered with your marriage,” Luca said. “The marquess dearly wished to keep you in San Luenne to facilitate the country’s growth, but he realized he had to give up on that idea to protect you.”

“A special education for me...”

Half of Bertine didn’t believe his story at all, and the other half accepted it because a lot of things made sense now. Luca lowered his voice, his eyes vigilant on their surroundings.

“Your father worries over San Luenne’s future from the bottom of his heart. When the rift first solidified between himself and the current king, he consoled himself with the thought of the current crown prince being the Kingdom’s hope. But as he grew up, the crown prince showed he had inherited his mother’s greed and father’s incompetence.”

Many of the aristocrats had spoken of exactly this in whispers for a long time now. “It seems we can’t rest our hopes on the next king either. All we can do is pray that his queen or the next chancellor is worthy.” That had been the general quiet consensus.

“The marquess has steadily been amassing assets in the Empire without the royal family’s knowledge,” Luca whispered. “All for the future of the Kingdom.”

“No, it can’t be... Are you saying that Father’s gathering funds to stage a coup? Father isn’t that kind of person.”

“Of course not. He has no designs on the throne. Your father is waiting for the day when someone capable of leading San Luenne appears, so that he can support them. Because as long as he’s close to the king in his position as chancellor, he can’t officially take part in the education of the next leader. Besides, the marquess’s age puts him out of the running for the throne regardless.”

Bertine couldn’t imagine her father as head of state either. He wasn’t the sort to care about power.

“Let me tell you, Bertie, your father always spoke so proudly of you and your talents. But ever since he realized the queen

considered him a threat, he curtailed the special educational plan he had set for you and decided to raise you as a normal noble instead.”

Her father had never openly praised her as an outstanding pupil, but now Bertine remembered a period in her life when he had been especially strict with her education. He refused to let her leave his study until she completed his assignments to perfection. She had often studied while on the verge of tears.

Then, at a certain point in time, her lessons on commerce became fewer and further between before they eventually stopped in favor of a more traditional education daughters of nobility undertook. Embroidery, etiquette, dancing, and such. *When did Father become less stern about my business education...* Thinking back on it now, she realized it happened around the time Luca’s family went bankrupt and her engagement to him fell through.

“In any case, like I said, the marquess wanted to protect you from the queen,” Luca continued. “Before my family even knew yours, the queen planted her younger sister, Rose, as your father’s second wife. All of this is why he sent you to the Federation, even though he despised the queen for everything she had done and was doing to him. Not to mention his keen interest in the southlands’ potential for years now.”

“I see. I finally, truly see. Everything happened according to the queen’s desires. Heh. Heh heh heh.”

“Bertie?”

“I understand how all our lives, mine, father’s, you and your family’s, were just trifles for the queen to toy with.”

“Bertie! Don’t even think of getting involved. It’s too dangerous.”

The whims of a greedy, paranoid, but powerful individual had destroyed all their lives. Twice now she’d upended Bertine’s life. Then there was her father. Not only had he been forced to work for someone who didn’t trust him, he had also been coerced into a marriage he had never even wanted. She knew her father well enough to realize he had a plan of some kind, but she couldn’t even go home to discuss the situation with him. Her stepmother was the queen’s eyes and ears, after all.

“Thank you, Luca. I learned a lot tonight.”

“Bertie, don’t do anything reckless. Remember, the queen isn’t just greedy. She’s cunning, too.”

“You’re right. She’s a terrifying person. But I’ve changed as well.”

“Bertie, please!”

“Oh, which reminds me. Luca, did you marry?”

“I did. She’s an imperial citizen. We have children, too.”

“Then you must prioritize your family. I understand.”

“Bertie, the marquess wants nothing more than for you to lead a safe and peaceful life. So think about the worst case before you do anything.”

“Luca. Let me tell you something. I decided that *I* would choose what sort of life I want to live.”

Bertine stood up and walked out of the cafe. Luca stared after her with a worried expression.

Her rage at the queen spurred her quickly back to the suite. When she stepped inside, Dorothée and Diego saw the look on her face and asked her in unison: “Did something happen?”

“No, not all.”

Then she brooded. There was no need to rush. She would be absolutely meticulous with her plan.

“The first step is selling the scarlet fabric.”

TWO days after her reunion with Luca, Bertine was at the estate of a certain imperial noble who lived in the capital. She sat across from the woman in a spacious room decorated in a luxurious but refined style. The lady in question wore her beautiful white hair in a graceful knot, draped in a dress of a fine, deep, subdued green.

“Bertine, I heard you’d been sent to the Federation as a bride in exchange for a reduction in reparations. But I see you still carry the du Jeanne surname.”

“I do. Instead of marrying His Excellency Cecilio, I proposed that I earn the shortfall myself.”

A throat chuckle escaped from the woman’s lips. “I’m not surprised to hear that from the Alchemist’s daughter. Now, then, dear, tell me why you’re here. Something about an unusual item in your possession?”

“Yes, this fabric. Lady Dalila, please have a look. Take your time.”

Bertine set a cloth-covered box on top of the table. The woman named Dalila picked it up, removed the lid, and picked up the

folded piece of scarlet fabric from within.

“My, my.”

“What do you think?”

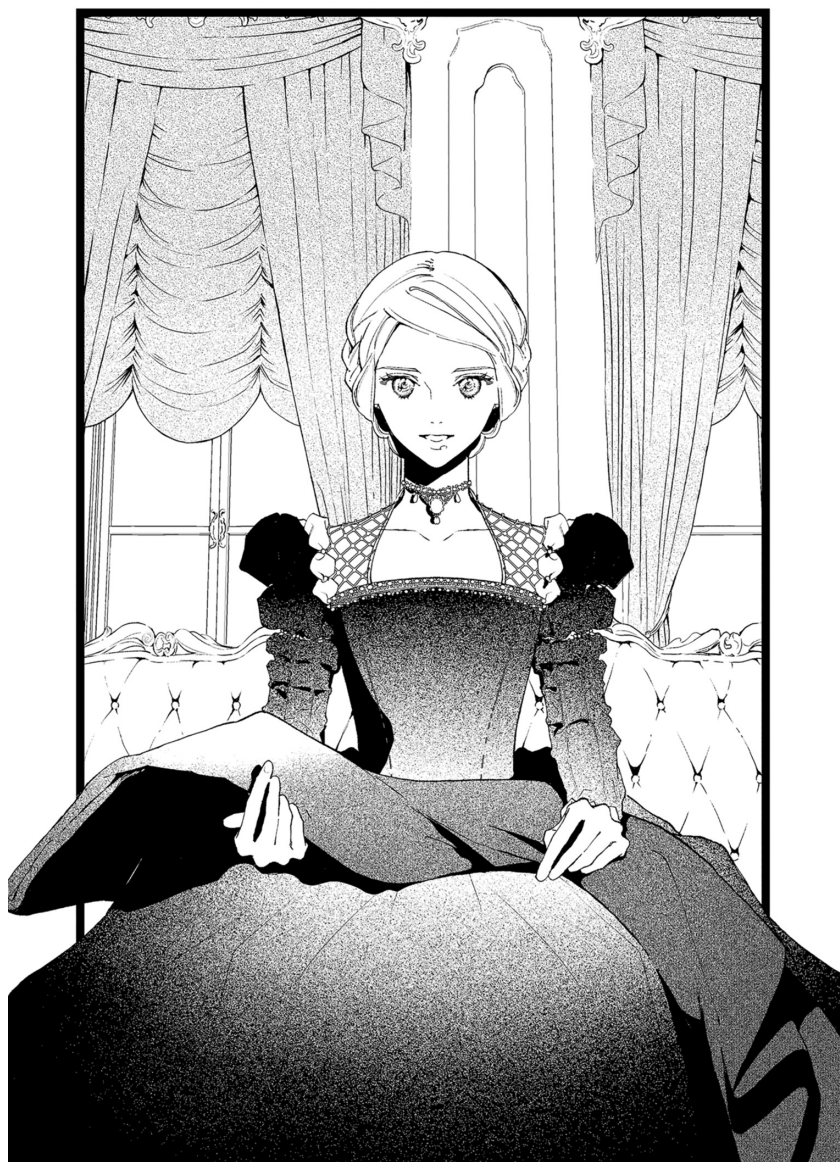
Dalila unfolded the cloth, then stood up and moved closer to the window. “At first glance, it looks like a vivid scarlet, but bathing it in light makes it glow brilliantly. What an unusual fabric.”

“I was astounded the first time I saw it too.”

“But wouldn’t a dress made from this be too gaudy?”

“I anticipated you would say that. Lady Dalila, look at this.”

Bertine withdrew a gossamer, thin white length of fabric from her bag and placed it on top of the scarlet piece.



“Layering a transparent fabric on top of the scarlet one makes the scarlet underneath look calm and elegant,” she explained. “Naturally, changing the color of the overlying fabric will change the appearance of the scarlet one too.”

Placing a thin fabric dyed blue on top of the scarlet piece transformed the color into a warm light purple. A yellow one changed it to a red-tinged cream.

“This is fascinating,” Dalila said. “I do quite like it, but I think the color might be a bit too youthful for me.”

“I knew you would have this concern as well, so let me allay it. I believe Lady Diana should be the one to wear this. She’ll draw everyone’s attention in it.”

Diana was Dalila’s daughter. Dalila, herself an earl’s daughter, had begun her career as a lady-in-waiting at the imperial palace. She had distinguished herself in her position and continued in her role tirelessly, aside from a break when she was pregnant. Before her retirement, she had climbed to the position of mistress of the robes, in charge of all ladies-in-waiting. Diana’s start in the same profession marked the opportunity for Dalila to retire.

Except to Dalila’s shock, Diana gave birth to the emperor’s child. Because the emperor already had an empress, Diana became his concubine. The son she bore, Claudio, was officially accepted as the second imperial prince. By nature of their existence, both Diana and her son were in precarious positions despite living in the imperial palace.

They went about their lives quietly and circumspectly so as not to stand out and make targets of themselves. But there was an undeniable, unspoken truth. Claudio, the second son, surpassed his elder brother in every respect and was held in high regard as well.

The empress undoubtedly found both Diana and Claudio’s existence maddening. It was obvious to those closest to the imperial family that she wouldn’t hesitate to eliminate the second prince for being superior to her own child. So Dalila had struggled to cope with the dangerous situation for many years now.

“If I’m too conspicuous, it will only cause trouble for my daughter and grandson.”

“No, Lady Dalila, you’re wrong. For it is only by having power that you will be able to protect Lady Diana and His Imperial Highness Claudio.”

Dalila ruminated silently for some time then captured Bertine's gaze with her own.

"Tell me the truth. What's your true aim in doing this?"

"Friendly relations between the Federation and the Empire."

"A surprisingly ordinary answer, hm?"

"Do you think so?"

At this point, Bertine asked Dalila if they could speak privately, and the woman ordered her staff from the parlor. Once they were alone, she explained the strategy she had spent the night crafting, a vital one to improve the relationship between the Southern Federation and the Empire. After Bertine finished, the two women stared at each other in ponderous silence for a while. Finally, Bertine herself broke the stalemate by speaking.

"Well, I won't deny the plan is on an extremely grand scale. Even should it work, I estimate it will take close to a decade. But I won't give up. I'll become strong enough so that no one can ever hurt me again."

"I wish Karina could see you now. How she regretted leaving you behind when you were so young. But I know she's looking down on you from God's garden."

"I think so too. I can imagine her telling me with a smile, 'You've always been strong.'"

Bertine offered Dalila a smile of her own and thanked her for the meeting. As she left the woman's residence, her face was drawn tight in determination.

Chapter 28: The Fruit Jars' Destination

AT the imperial restaurant that bought the four hundred jars of various fruit marmalades and jams made in the Federation's southern territories. After Bertine finished her work and returned to the Federation, the manager, Cefirino, arranged for ten of the boxes to be sent to the hotel where Luca worked. He spoke to the head chef there.

"Head chef, can you incorporate these into your menu?"

"Oh, Manager Cefirino, are you referring to the marmalades? Ah, I see there are jams as well. Yes, indeed, I can. These will be wonderful in desserts and as condiments for breakfast too. I'm quite looking forward to using them, although I must admit I've never seen most of these fruits. I'll think about how to incorporate them into dishes after sampling the flavors."

"Lady Bertine is the merchant responsible for them, so please do your best with them."

"Is that right? Understood. I'll do everything I can to support her."

LATER that day, during lunchtime, the head chef and his apprentices taste-tested the jars' contents.

"This is the first time I've had any of these flavors, but they're all so delicious. And they look quite pleasing to the eye as well."

"Head chef, the bright red fruit stands out really well."

"We can reduce these into dessert sauces too."

The head chef decided they were all fresh and unique items that could be served by themselves. The very next morning, he chose one of the products to serve for breakfast. One of the hotel guests particularly enjoyed a concoction made of a fruit labeled as longan.

"Head chef, a guest sends his regards, saying he would like more of the longan jam."

"Longan, longan... Ah, yes, the white, round fruit. The jar

recommended it be served with tea and butter crackers. I thought it was quite delicious as well when I tried it.”

The guest turned out to be Earl Barve, a resident of the Empire’s north who was in the imperial capital on business. He preferred to stay at this hotel during his visits to the capital, so he had been pleasantly surprised to see a fruit marmalade, one he’d never before set eyes on, accompanying his breakfast today. Staring at the label, he learned the fruit was called longan.

“Delicious. The scent is wonderful and the texture is marvelously velvety. I’ll have them serve it again for my afternoon tea.”

The six small pieces of longan disappeared in a flash into the earl’s stomach when he enjoyed the marmalade again later that day with his tea and crackers.

“I wonder if this is exclusive to the hotel. Would they let me purchase a few jars to take home?” the early mused. “I know my wife and daughters would be delighted to try it. Might you summon the manager for me?”

The earl’s attendant did his bidding and shortly thereafter, Luca visited his room.

“Earl Barve, I was told you wanted to purchase a few jars of the longan marmalade, but we have other varieties as well. Would you like to see our collection?”

“Oh-ho, you don’t say. Then show me everything you have.”

With a smile, Luca withdrew from the room then returned a short time later with a silver tray bearing ten types of fruit marmalades and jams.

“They all look so delectable. I’d like three jars of each for my trip home. Actually, make that five of the longan.”

“Understood. One jar costs a small silver coin. Is that acceptable?”

“What a steal. Yes, that will be fine.”

Luca bowed politely and left the earl’s room. Out in the hallway, he grinned in satisfaction. Bertine had requested that the restaurant manager sell a jar for five large copper coins. He thought it likely she had priced it low without including transportation and labor costs because her first step had been to put the products on the market and create demand for them. But Luca knew that five large copper coins would hardly cover the costs of transportation

and other basic manufacturing expenses, making it unlikely for her to see any real profit at that price.

“I’ll do what I can in Bertie’s stead to make sure these sell.”

Luca recalled his time in San Luenne involved in commerce. He and his father had traveled to the Empire by ship countless times, immersing themselves in construction projects throughout the country. People loved the buildings they made for both their design and function. It had always made him proud to see their structures become part of each town and city’s landscape.

But his work vanished because of the greed of a powerful person. And his father died, heartbroken over the destruction of his business and his reputation. Luca wondered what Bertine intended to do. Did she plan to rebel against the royal family? No, she was the Alchemist’s daughter, after all. She wouldn’t use force to get her way, so her ideas must revolve around commerce instead.

When the day came, Luca wanted to help her. He had fled the queen’s treachery and survived in the Empire, but he couldn’t deny the anger and frustration festering in him at always being on the losing end. If his father were still alive, Luca would be too ashamed to face him. Of course, he had to be careful with his aid because of his family, but he would wait for the day Bertine would turn the tables on the queen.

For now, Luca knew the best way he could support her work was by selling her goods to the aristocrats of the wealthy Empire. Though it was an extremely small step, he knew that by helping her now, he’d started the journey to becoming someone who could fight the queen.

EARL Barve returned to his domain in the north of the Empire bearing thirty-two jars of fruit marmalades and jams as souvenirs. His wife and children greeted him with sunny smiles.

“Father, welcome home!”

“I’m home. Were you all good for your mother?”

“Yes! Did you bring us souvenirs?”

“I did. You’ll like them.” The earl showed them the collection of marmalades and jams.

“Wow! What is this? Look at all these pictures. I’ve never seen these fruits before.”

“I had this one at the hotel I stayed at and it was so delicious, I

bought jars of all varieties. Why don't we eat some right away?"

"I want to!"

Both his son and daughter were so excited he knew he had chosen the perfect souvenirs on this trip. His wife beamed as well. The earl would have loved to eat the concoctions right out of the jars, but after sampling one, his wife instructed the staff to prepare some bread.

They toasted thin slices of fresh bread and spread butter on them then brought them out to the earl's family. His wife daubed a thin layer of a sweet marmalade onto a few slices before giving one to each of her children.

"Mmm!"

"The saltiness of butter pairs really well with the sweetness of the fruit, eh?"

"Father, I want to try another flavor."

"Go ahead. Eat all you want."

"But, Father, what if we finish it all now?"

"Don't fret. In that case, I'll write a letter to the hotel and send for more."

"Hurray!"

His wife chewed politely, her expression pleased. "Darling, I think I want to include these with scones at my next tea party. I'm sure everyone will be delighted to try all these since they can't be found here."

"A wonderful idea, dear. I bought many jars, so use them however you wish."

The people living in the cold north of the Empire lit their fireplaces early in the year. Which made fruits valuable in the region. Apples, raspberries, blue honeysuckle, and gooseberries grew here, but these large, velvety fruits could only be grown in their southern neighbor's climate.

"I see the Federation now sells goods like these as well, eh?" the earl mused.

"I'm not surprised, considering their outstanding leader in the latest war. The imperial army suffered terrible losses, didn't it?"

"Indeed. If the Empire continues to underestimate the southlands as it did in the past, it risks falling behind."

SEVERAL days later, the Federation's fruit goods were a hit with

her tea party guests as well.

“Where can I buy these?”

“My husband purchased them at a hotel in the capital. He intends to place another order with them before our family can finish the lot.”

Hearing that, one of her friends put in a request.

“Then would he mind including an order for my family as well, along with his?”

Her request opened the floodgates for the other women to do the same.

“For me as well.”

“Well, I’d like to second the request.”

Altogether, the five noblewomen’s orders totaled a considerable amount. The countess immediately drafted a letter to the hotel in the capital with all their orders and sealed it in an envelope. Two delivery methods were available. One was an inexpensive option that combined several people’s orders heading to the same region and the other was a direct delivery service that transported packages individually.

“A total of two hundred jars for our five families. It’s fairly expensive, but shall I have the hotel send them via direct delivery?”

Aristocrats of the Empire were subject to ridicule if they acted miserly, especially by their own peers. The women decided direct delivery would be the best option in this case. In her letter, the countess included the total price of two small gold coins as well as an amount to cover the transportation expenses that would be paid to a company specializing in the direct delivery method.

SOME time later, the letter arrived at the hotel in the imperial capital, including the advance payment. Luca realized soon enough they would be flooded with even more orders. He just barely managed to fulfill this order with the hotel’s stock and the restaurant’s remaining inventory. But anticipating the popularity of the products, he thought it prudent to place another order with Bertine ahead of time. If this hotel acted as the intermediary between her and customers, it would be much faster to respond to demand than for her to deal with each of them herself.

“I’ll start with an order for six hundred. They keep very well though, so a thousand would be better. That will reduce the

delivery cost too.”

Luca remembered that Bertine worked directly for the Federation’s leader, His Excellency Cecilio. So he immediately filled out an order form and accompanied it with an advance payment addressed directly to the Federation’s leader.

When Ignacio eventually received the document, he was so stunned by the quantity of the order and the payment that he rushed right away to inform Cecilio in his office. But that was a tale for another time.

Chapter 29: Two Chiefs and Krusula's New Manager

IN the Southern Federation's hinterlands, at the house of one of its chiefs, Bruno.

"Lord Bruno, Lord Kurt is seeking an audience with you."

"Kurt? The man himself? What does he want?"

"All he said is that he wishes to meet with you, sir."

The pain in his back had finally faded enough to be manageable, so Bruno stood up slowly then entered the drawing room reserved for guests. Sprawled in one of the rattan chairs was Kurt, the chief of a neighboring district.

"Well met, Bruno! I heard you were bedridden, but you're looking mighty sprightly to me," Kurt boomed.

"So you knew about my condition, eh? Yet you never visited me once while I was infirm. Tell me what brings you here now."

"Perhaps this gift will put a stop to your sulking."

Kurt showed off his bundle to Bruno. Two large wild birds, freshly strangled, bound in string.

"Oh-ho, gaje?"

"One of your friends, right?"

"Hm, suspicious. You're not one to proffer gifts like these, so tell me what you're plotting."

"I heard your people are making bottled goods. The women in my domain want to try their hand at it too, so they've been pestering me to ask yours to teach them how."

"Heh heh heh. Now I understand why you're here. They learned from Bertine, specifically a method to make sure the goods don't grow mold either."

"The young lady from San Luenne?! You don't say. She was a mouthy little thing, but apparently talented in surprising ways, eh?"

Bruno was tempted to keep Kurt in suspense, drag out the torture of whether or not he'd agree to help the man. But His Excellency had sent him a message that if people in the other districts wanted to learn, he was to help them, especially with the

important points to note in the marmalade and jam-making process. Bertine had sent a veritable mountain of glassware and sugar, so his warehouse was overflowing with plenty of materials.

“Bertine had a feeling you and the others might approach me about the venture, so I have a detailed set of instructions from her,” Bruno said. “I also have ample supplies of jars and sugar. Take enough with you. I’ll send along a few of my people who are familiar with the process. Bertine said it’s about time we all became rich together. And she’s offered to give the makers 60 percent of the profits after expenses. She’ll take as many as we can produce, so don’t worry about any quotas. Just make them. Once you finish a shipment, bring them to me and I’ll combine it with ours to send to Ybit.”

“That would save me a lot of trouble, thank you. As much as it pains us to admit it, the proper medicine we can buy is much more effective than our medicinal herbs on the babes and children when they fall sick. And money allows us to afford them.”

Bruno and Kurt had been rivals since they were young. Even after they both became chiefs, over the years, they would often butt heads on one thing or another. But ever since Bruno formed a working relationship with Bertine and Cecilio, he had come to realize that locking horns and fighting constantly was a waste of his time and energy.

“The young folks are doing their damndest in this big, wide world. I thought it wouldn’t be fair if us graybeards held them back with our meaningless squabbles. So, you’re welcome.”

“Well, now that you mention it, you might have a point...”

“Care to try some of the fruity goods I kept for myself and my family? You like sweet things, don’t you?” Bruno offered.

“You remembered, eh? I love the fruits of the forest, but I heard that this jarred stuff is like the sweetest, stickiest, and scrumptious candy. Frankly, I’ve had quite the hankering to taste it.”

Cassandra, who’d been nearby listening to their conversation, immediately left the room. Not long after, she returned with two of their servants bearing an assortment of the jams and marmalades on small dishes along with bread and tea. There was also cheese made from water buffalo milk.

Kurt devoured everything, taking great pleasure in the variety of fruit products.

“As soon as the women in my domain finish whipping up a batch of our own goods, I’ll send them to you. I’m in your debt, Bruno.”

“Think nothing of it, Kurt.”

AFTER Kurt returned to his own territory, his people immediately set to work picking fruits from their own heavily laden fruit trees and began the process of crafting marmalades and jams. The women were delighted to learn how to turn their excess crop of fruits, given to the livestock as feed, into money instead. They worked diligently at the venture. Once they used up the supplies and had a modest shipment ready, it was delivered to Bruno’s house for shipment to Ybit.

Then soon enough, Bruno and Kurt’s relationship deepened to the point that they met once a week and poured drinks for each other, talking into the night. Naturally, this meant their people interacted more with each other as well, strengthening the bonds between their communities.

“**MY** lady, another shipment of bottled fruit goods has arrived from Lord Bruno. No breakages this time. According to his letter, production began in Lord Kurt’s territory as well, so this shipment contains 50 percent more than usual.”

“Wonderful!” Bertine exclaimed. “Just in time too, since apparently a large order was sent to the hotel from the Empire’s north. Luca asked me to send a thousand jars in his order, just in case. I’m relieved to hear that there were no breakages, either. Looks like both the packers and shippers have gotten used to the process, hm?”

In their very first shipment, there hadn’t been enough cushioning, so a fair number of bottles broke in transport. It had been a grueling undertaking to wash the sticky residue off the intact bottles. But more than that, it had been frustrating to see so much of the actual product go to waste in such a manner. Since that first experience, Bertine had sent them letters with detailed instructions as well as urged them to be more careful. Her efforts had clearly paid off.

"The order must have come from aristocrats in the north of the Empire then?"

"Yes, I think so. I know these jarred goodies are delicious, but I wager they would be absolutely amazed to taste the fresh fruit when they're fully ripened. I hope to one day be able to send them those too. I'd love to see their reactions."

"I'm sure the day will come sooner than we think thanks to you, my lady."

"Indeed, with the hotel that will be the talk amongst the imperials." Bertine then stared at the necklace that was near completion.

"My lady, where do you intend to sell that necklace? In the Empire, after all?"

"Actually, this one will be for a certain woman. I hope it will give her the strength and courage she needs."

Joy swelled within Dorothée and brought a smile to her lips as she watched her lady's animated attitude. She couldn't be happier to witness her charge's dramatic transformation. For the marquess back in San Luenne had been extremely strict with her education. Nevertheless, Lady Bertine had never given up, diligently working on the assignments until she understood and completed them.

But Dorothée had noticed how sad Bertine became when her father's special education for her had essentially disappeared around the time her first engagement fell through. Because Bertine had seen their lessons as a way to connect with her busy father.

Except now, Lady Bertine was making full use of the knowledge her father had bestowed on her back then. The scarlet fabric, the jarred goods, the accessories sold at Krusula, the imperial language lessons. Her lady had initiated each of these ventures and they were all going extremely well. These efforts by the young lady had gladdened her heart, but she was even more impressed by the fact that Bertine had thought up an even grander plan. Dorothée couldn't be more proud of her.

"Dorothée, I'm thinking of hiring someone to act as the manager of Krusula. I just have my hands so full with everything else, you see. I'd like to ask Isabella, David's mother, but I'm not sure."

"The matter of wages is the sticking point, hm? What if you paid her more than she earns at the tavern? I think she would accept in that case."

“Perhaps I should start by asking her how much she earns there and if she’d be interested in working as my store manager.”

“I suspect she will happily accept.”

Bertine decided not to waste time and went straight to Isabella’s house. She told the younger woman she wanted to discuss something before she went to work, so Isabella invited her inside.

Isabella’s house hadn’t changed much since her husband was alive. There was their ottoman covered in lovely cushions. A small, round table. Tree nuts, oddly shaped rocks, and other bits and ends the children picked up were arranged on top of the bureau. It was a humble home, but a cozy one.

“I know this is out of the blue, Isabella, but I was wondering what your monthly salary is at the restaurant where you work,” Bertine began. “Because if I can match or exceed what they pay you, I’d like you to work for me as my store manager.”

“Oh, my wages? Around eight large silver coins a month. And any tips the customers leave are half mine. Altogether, I’d say about nine large silver coins.”

Bertine nodded as she sipped on the tea Isabella had poured. Then she quietly put the cup down and stared intently at the younger woman.

“I can pay you a salary of one small gold coin. Additionally, I’ll give you all the profits of whatever accessories you make. Your work hours will be from the morning’s ninth chime to the evening’s seventh. I have no problem with David and Camilla playing in the store while you work because I know they’re good kids who won’t touch anything they’re not supposed to. What do you think?”

“You can get someone much more qualified with such wonderful conditions. Are you sure you want *me* to work for you?”

An offer like this was wishful thinking for Isabella. She couldn’t believe it.

“I like your attention to detail, Isabella. Not to mention your conscientiousness, sincerity, and hard work. There’s no way I can let another shop have someone as amazing as you, so I’m honestly being selfish by snapping you up myself.”

“Then yes! My answer is yes. Please allow me to work at Krusula.”

That was how Krusula, the shop dealing in embroidery and accessories, acquired a new manager in Isabella. It didn’t take long for other businesses to try to recruit Isabella, but she firmly refused

all offers because she was determined to stay at Krusula.

Chapter 30: The Empress and Diana

IN the Empire of Centaur's capital, on the night Bertine returned to the Federation. Dalila had sent for a dressmaker she was well acquainted with. She ordered her staff to leave the drawing room. On the table lay the scarlet bolt of fabric.

"Lady Dalila, this is...!"

"A marvelous shade, isn't it?"

"I can see a very fine shimmer of gold throughout. I wonder what the dye is made of."

"I know not. The secret is closely guarded, apparently. An old friend's daughter gifted it to me. Ah, right, let me show you the best way to use it." Dalila picked up the transparent fabric Bertine had left behind and layered it on top of the scarlet cloth.

"Hm, this method softens the vibrant color."

"I would like you to make a dress for my daughter using this cloth. Can you do it?"

"Yes, of course. I'm assuming it will be for the banquet held by His Imperial Majesty, yes? I'll make sure to finish it before then. Lady Diana will be the belle of the ball, I guarantee it."

Dalila smiled, satisfied with the response. Only a few days remained until the party. But she had known this seamstress would undoubtedly agree to her request because of her love for her profession and the magic of the scarlet fabric.

The emperor's whims forever changed the course of her daughter's life. Ever since giving birth to her grandchild, both her daughter and her grandson had led restrained, suffocating lives so as not to draw others' hatred. For the sake of her daughter and grandson, Dalila herself had bowed her head when she had been loath to so as not to make any enemies amongst the nobility. She had taken the utmost care to be the epitome of consideration to earn the favor of as many aristocrats as possible.

In hindsight though, it had been foolish to do so. Dalila had started viewing her own strategy in this way after listening to Bertine's ideas. Because it didn't matter how much they minimized

their own existence, the empress would always despise her daughter and grandson. Which made her consider Bertine's suggestion of another way to live their lives. Instead of fading into the background as invisible shadows, it might prove better to live so boldly in the sun that their enemies would think twice before they moved against them.

Until Bertine had pointed it out, Dalila hadn't realized that her daughter and grandson's diminished presence had subjected them to ridicule from those who had no right to cast aspersions at all. That it would prevent those still wishing to protect them from approaching them at all.

"I'll become so strong that no one can ever hurt me again."

Bertine's resolve had burned fiercely in her words. When she'd heard them, she couldn't deny that human beings were the sort of creatures who looked down on their timid fellows.

"Claudio is innocent in all this. And yet, though he's only twelve years old, he's spent his entire life holding his breath, waiting for the rug to be pulled out from underneath him. He never should have been put in such an untenable situation. I managed to achieve the position of mistress of the robes, but when it came to my own child and grandchild, I could not have acted more foolishly."

TWENTY days after Bertine's visit, the party hosted by the imperial family was in full swing. The emperor and empress danced together. Diana waited quietly at the edge of the hall, waiting for their performance to end, before making her appearance. Claudio, the second imperial prince, couldn't attend because he was still too young at the tender age of twelve.

After an appropriate pause, the emperor left the empress's side and strode toward Diana. He took her hand and led her underneath the sparkling chandelier, lit by countless candles. There, he once more admired her dress. The aristocrats surrounding them also belatedly noticed the oddly enchanting nature of Diana's dress.

At first glance, the garment seemed to be a pale blue. But when she moved, the overlay of sheer silk clung closely to the fabric underneath, creating the illusion of a light purple. When she lifted the hem of the sheer overskirt, the scarlet fabric with its subtle shimmer revealed itself.

With her strawberry blonde tresses and pale blue eyes, Diana was a stunning twenty-nine-year-old woman. Her pale, velvety skin seemed to glow from within, enhancing her youthful vitality.

“Diana, you’re beautiful.”

“I’m honored you would think so, Your Majesty.”

All the nobles in attendance watched them, entranced by the dreamy picture the two made. The empress caught the spectacle from the corner of her eye. She was forty years old. Her first two children were girls. At the age of thirty, she finally gave birth to the long-awaited crown prince, her third child.

So, she hated Diana and her son with every fiber of her being. The rumors that reached her ears spoke of the concubine’s child in favorable tones. How he excelled more than her own son in both academics and military arts. It was a truly abhorrent situation for her.

“Find out where that fabric came from and buy every last bit of it. You may also command the sellers to pull it completely from their shelves as well. I won’t have anyone imitating *her*.”

The empress hissed the instructions quietly to her lady-in-waiting nearby. She acted immediately starting that night. It didn’t take her long to discover the dressmaker who crafted it. She even found out that Dalila had been the one to supply the fabric, but no matter who she spoke to, the lady-in-waiting couldn’t determine the identity of the person who had gifted Dalila with the cloth.

Two months passed as she searched in vain for answers, and then it was time for another banquet, this one hosted by a duke at his residence. The duke in question was the emperor’s younger brother and he treated both of his nephews the same. From the empress’s perspective, he was a cunning man who never made his position known until there was a clear front-runner.

Two days after the duke’s party, in the empress’s private chambers.

“What did you learn at the banquet?”

“Lady Diana attended the event wearing the scarlet dress from His Majesty’s party. Except this time, without the overskirt, so the wondrous red fabric now on its own caused quite a stir amongst the guests.”

“I see.”

“As a result, there’s been an increase in the number of young

ladies and noblewomen seeking an audience with her.”

“Find out the name of every single person who visited her.”

Why did Diana suddenly decide to make her presence known? Only two years remained until her own son would officially be recognized as the crown prince. She had been convinced that once the investiture ceremony took place, she would no longer have to continue her cold war against her husband’s concubine and bastard child. But the empress felt the anxiety of the hunted now.

AFTER taking the “wondrous cloth” to the Empire, Bertine returned to the Federation and her work as usual. She continued making progress on the necklace while she continually referred to the designs Meira sold to her. Her imperial language classes were back in swing, along with her free luncheons offering her special brand of ingredient-leaden soups.

In the necklace she created, Bertine used a great many small but high-quality gemstones. She had been able to procure them thanks to Cecilio’s mediation. He had negotiated for her to buy the Federation’s uncut stones from an imperial vendor who processed them at an absurdly low price.

Then one day, a messenger arrived from the capitol building in which Cecilio worked.

“His Excellency requests your presence in his office.”

“Of course. Right away, I assume?”

“Yes, as soon as you’re able.”

Bertine hurriedly changed into a day dress and departed for the capitol building. When she arrived, Ignacio greeted her anxiously. He led her inside to Cecilio’s office.

“Ignacio, whatever is the matter?” she asked.

“Um, well, there’s something His Excellency and I wanted to confirm.”

Cecilio hadn’t even waited for her to enter his office before he ran into them. “Bertine, how much did you sell the scarlet fabric for?”

“I sold one length, enough for a dress, at seven small gold coins, and the other bolt I gifted to an acquaintance. Perhaps I should have charged more? Though I really do think one large gold coin would have been too much...”

“No, no, no, not at all. To confirm, seven small gold coins for a

dress-length fabric?"

"Yes. I was tempted to charge eight, but I wanted to encourage the merchant to buy more eventually, so I ultimately decided on seven."

"And you don't think...that was *too* much?"

"Absolutely not, especially because the buyer is an aristocrat from the Empire, an affluent nation. Your Excellency, let me give you an example. Suppose someone suddenly presented you with a super sword you had never before seen in your life. How much would you pay for it? Would seven small gold coins be worth the price?"

"Seven...yes, if it was me, I would pay it."

"Precisely. As you would want such a unique sword, so too do women feel the same hunger for a marvelous fabric."

Cecilio tapped a finger to his cheek and considered her words. Finally convinced by her argument, he decided to discuss the actual reason he had summoned her.

"The truth is, we received a communication from Countess Dalila for another twenty bolts of the fabric. She wants half of them to be the subdued red you mentioned you could create for her. Along with her letter, she included a payment of fourteen large gold coins."

"Yes, sir. It seems I'll have to create enough dye to send to the dye maker, hm?"

"Bertine, you don't seem at all surprised by the size of her order. Or the amount she paid either, for that matter."

Bertine schooled her features, careful not to let her sinister smile sneak through. "I'm not. I anticipated just that amount in her order. Since she sent payment in advance, we need to determine the price for the bark and pay the chief of Bilva. Your Excellency, might we discuss it now?"

"Of course. An excellent suggestion."

The two of them spent a long time discussing the price of the tree bark, the conservation of the tree itself, as well as how to keep the existence of the tree bark confidential. By the time they came to an agreement on everything, it was already dark outside.

"I apologize for keeping you here so late, Bertine."

"Not at all, since I'm the one who requested the talk. Really, please don't worry about it."

"Would you like to join me for supper?" Cecilio invited. "I

know a great restaurant that serves delicious alcohol and food. Think of it as a thank you for the dried meat and jams last time as well.”

“It would be my pleasure! I’ve actually been meaning to explore a new restaurant.”

“Then I’ll have one of my people sent to your house, so that your household knows you’ll be returning late.”

And so, the two of them went on their first outing together.

TO BE CONTINUED...

Side Story 1: Bertine and Dorothée's Bond

MARCHIONESS Karina du Jeanne comforted her nine-year-old daughter, Bertine. She knelt on the floor, her head buried in her mother's lap as the woman sat in her chair. The little girl sobbed uncontrollably.

"Bertine, don't cry. It's just that your father has high expectations of you."

"What does 'expectations' mean?"

"He thinks you can do so much more, and that's why his lessons have become so much stricter."

Even as she spoke, Karina struggled to find the right words to say to her daughter. Her husband was strict with Bertine. She understood it was because he had high hopes for her, but she still wondered if it was really necessary for him to be so rigid. Bertine refused to give up on her assignments. She would complete them even while crying, so he continued giving her increasingly more difficult work.

Karina had argued with her husband many times over the issue. She hated seeing her child in such a state. But her husband was unbending. "The child is talented." That was his response each time and he refused to soften his guidance of Bertine.

"Bertie, you have a knack for looking at the big picture. 'What if this method was used instead?' 'This is another solution.' You know how creatively you think? Well, there are very few people like you in this world, which is why I think your father wants to strengthen your talents even more. To help you grow into a strong person."

What Bertine wanted to ask her mother was if her father actually hated her. And then she wanted her mother to say, "Of course he doesn't. He loves you very much." But a small part of her feared that he actually did hate her, and that anxiety held her back from voicing the words out loud.

Her mother had a frail constitution, so even spending time talking to her like this made them both happy. Karina had hugged

and petted Bertine a great deal, trying to console her. Thus, nine-year-old Bertine decided she didn't want to trouble her mother by asking such a question.

"My lady, how about we take a walk in the garden now?"

Whenever Dorothée, her maid, suggested the idea, Bertine understood she actually meant, "How about we let your mother rest?"

"Thank you very much, Mother. I'll go with Dorothée now."

"Enjoy yourself, dear. Make sure you wear a hat."

"I will."

Her mother gently brushed her cheek one last time before Bertine stepped away from her bed. She felt soothed knowing her mother's wonderful scent lingered on her skin now.

Dorothée consoled her while they strolled in the garden.

"My lady, you must know that the marquess is terribly fond of you."

"Is he really?"

"He is. If he truly didn't care for you, he would never spend so much time teaching you. You know how busy he is too."

"I wonder."

"Don't. I know I'm right."

Dorothée's words brightened Bertine's mood at once. The third daughter of a baron, Dorothée was three years older than Bertine and had only recently been employed by the marquess. Currently, she was Bertine's exclusive lady's maid. A shard of blue glass was the catalyst for their relationship.

One day, Bertine happened to pass by the garden when Dorothée had been clearing it of fallen leaves. When the maid saw her, she called out to her and drew near.

"My lady, this is for you."

She took out a dark blue, flat, stone-like object from her pocket and handed it to Bertine. It was sea glass, a shard of glass smoothed of all its sharp edges by the constant friction between the waves and rocks. But Bertine hadn't known what it was then because she'd hardly ever been to the seaside. She had assumed it was a shard from a broken glass.

"It's beautiful. Is it a gemstone?"

"Oh, no, hardly. It's glass. The day after a particularly rough tide, all sorts of things wash up on a beach, you see. When I still lived at home, my sisters and I would always head to the shore after

a storm and go treasure hunting. This is one of the things I found.”

“Then this is a treasure? You can’t give something so special to me.”

“Of course, I can. I’ll tell you a secret. This glass has the power to cheer me up whenever I feel upset, so I want you to have it, my lady. Because you seem sad to me.”

Dorothée had made up the story on an impulse. She had wanted to cheer up her lady with a little something and this was the first thing she could think of on the spot. Bertine accepted the gift, scrutinizing it. The gentle, cloudy blue of the glass shard pleased her. She loved the smooth texture as well.

Bertine studied for days on end. Her father hardly ever praised her and only continued assigning her difficult problems during their lessons. Despite her strenuous education, she was still ultimately a nine-year-old girl. And she’d arrived at the conclusion that her father hated her, a devastating thought. But this new maid understood her sadness and consoled her. She even gave her a treasure that would cheer her up. So Bertine instantly took a strong liking to Dorothée.

“Mother, I’d like Dorothée to be my personal maid. I want to be with her forever.”

“Oh, my, this is the first time I’ve heard you say such a thing. So you like her, hm?”

“I do. So can she be my maid? Please?”

“Who am I to deny my adorable daughter’s wish?”

“Thank you very much, Mother!”

And that was how Dorothée was promoted to her position as the marquess’s daughter’s exclusive maid not long after she began her employment there. Because Karina often fell ill, she hadn’t been able to spoil Bertine as much as she would have liked, leaving her daughter feeling lonely often. So Dorothée made up for the lack herself.

Despite being only twelve years old herself, she had decided to start working to help her family financially. Naturally, considering the fact she hadn’t been working for the marquess very long, she was plagued by both anxiety and yearning for her own family. On the one hand, she worked harder than most and was quite patient. On the other, she also succumbed to loneliness herself, which made working for Bertine a special joy. Dorothée could spoil the marquess’s daughter to her heart’s content and provide the

companionship the little girl so desperately sought. It made her job worthwhile, filling the hole in her own heart.

Dorothée's mother had given birth to seven children. She was an energetic woman, always ready with a sunny smile. In contrast, Karina, the Marchioness du Jeanne, was a pale, slender woman who was often bedridden from illness. So seeing Bertine happy at just being able to talk to her mother made Dorothée's heart ache for the little girl. Which was why she was determined to devote all her energy to being the best maid she could be for Bertine, especially since the request had come from the girl herself.

TWO years later, Lady Karina came down with a persistent cold. Up until then, whenever she felt healthy enough, she would visit the Empire with her family and have picnics nearby. But once she fell ill with lung sickness, her poor health persisted. After some time, she couldn't even rise from her bed. And then, finally, on a sunny afternoon in autumn, Lady Karina journeyed to God's garden.

Bertine wept for a very long time, for so long that she might have forgotten how to speak. Dorothée never left her side once throughout her long vigil.

"My lady, please eat something, or you'll collapse."

Still Bertine refused to come out from underneath her bed covers.

"My lady, I'll stay with you here tonight. So please don't fret and sleep."

"You'll be here forever?"

"Yes, all night."

"No, that's not what I mean. You won't ever leave me, will you, Dorothée?"

She realized what Bertine actually wanted to say, and she felt tears well in her eyes.

"Of course not, my lady. I have no plans to join God in His garden because I'll be by your side forever."

Bertine finally peeked out from underneath her quilt.

"My lady." Dorothée took the younger girl's hand.

"Stay with me always, Dorothée."

"Yes, forever. I'll stay with you until you tell me you don't need me anymore."

Bertine slipped out of bed and hugged Dorothée tightly. She

cried with her while gently rubbing the younger girl's back because she could never see the kind Lady Karina again.

After that, Bertine didn't cry again during her lessons. Not the ones with her father or her etiquette classes. She worked hard at absorbing her education.

"Dorothée, I'll become a person you can be proud to work for."

"Do your best, my lady. I too shall do my best to become a maid worthy of you."

The powerful bond of trust between them has continued unwaveringly since.

From society's perspective, Bertine was not only the marquess's daughter but the chancellor's too. Lovely and intelligent. Seemingly so blessed that others might curse God for his unfairness.

But Dorothée knew the truth and she couldn't help feeling sorry for Bertine, who had lost her mother at the tender age of eleven. Which was why she had learned everything she could about her young charge. Her favorite tea, snacks, foods, dresses, and more. So whenever the occasion called for it, she would be ready to comfort Bertine however she needed comforting.

WHEN her beloved lady was fifteen years old, a young man and his father visited the marquess. He had brown hair and brown eyes. A calm, gentle expression. Finely made tailored clothing and an impeccable demeanor. The young man appeared to be a gentle soul with an unquestionably good upbringing.

"Hello, Lady Bertine."

He spoke to her with a smile, a possible candidate for her future husband.

"If they get along, we'll let them marry."

Hearing the adults say this made Bertine happy. Dorothée was delighted for her as well.

But then one day, all talk of an engagement between them vanished. She heard their butler say the entire family had fled San Luenne without a trace.

Why now? When my lady was finally happy again. Dorothée gnashed her teeth in anger and frustration. Nervous about Bertine's reaction, she nevertheless knocked on the door of her chambers. No response.

"My lady, I'm coming in."

She stepped into the dim room after announcing herself and found Bertine sitting in a chair by the window, staring at the evening sky. The sight of her eyes swollen from crying pained Dorothée. She knelt on the floor by Bertine's chair and stared up at her face.

"Dorothée, it seems he's no longer in San Luenne," she said. "Father hasn't said anything more about the engagement either."

"My lady..."

Though she had come here to comfort Bertine, Dorothée suddenly started sobbing herself. If she could trade places with her and carry the burden of Bertine's unhappiness herself, she would. She desperately wished she could.

"Thank you for the tears. Both my mother and Luca are gone, but you've always been there for me, Dorothée, and I'm grateful for that."

"Always. I'll always be by your side, my lady!"

Bertine slid down from her chair and sat on the floor to be with her. Then she covered her face with both hands and wept, ever so softly, ever so quietly. Dorothée wrapped her arms around the younger girl and cried with her.

That night, upon Bertine's request, Dorothée slept in the same bed. She was nervous, but Bertine snuggled close to her.

"I don't have many memories of sleeping together with Mother, so thank you, Dorothée."

"Then sleep well tonight, my lady."

"I will."

I need to help her feel better. Tomorrow, I'll take her to her favorite flower garden. Dorothée fell asleep with that thought in her mind.

Side Story 2: Isabella Remarries

EVER since she'd accepted the role of manager of the shop, Krusula, Isabella's daily life had been extremely fulfilling. The accessories she crafted were finally selling for a high price and the shop's income revenues remained stable as well. She no longer had to leave her children home alone at night while she worked.

Another unexpected but pleasant surprise was David's growing interest in making accessories too. The first thing he made was a bracelet.

"Mother, I'd like to make something too. Can I borrow some materials? I'll take it apart and give it all back to you after I finish."

"If you're truly serious about this, I'll buy you your own materials. There's no need to take it apart either."

"Really?"

"Yes. What do you want to make?"

"It's a secret."

Just like his mother, David started out by drawing a design. A bracelet that sandwiched tiny silver feathers between black onyx beads. Isabella's eyes widened in amazement at her son's surprisingly strong sense of design.

He threaded a thin needle with silk thread then slipped seven onyx beads onto it, followed by a silver feather. He repeated the pattern several times before fixing a silver clasp to the end.

Isabella decided it would be best not to watch him while he worked since she'd already peeked at his design when he'd told her not to. David finished and presented the finished product to her. She feigned ignorance in her response.

"It's done, hm? Oh, my! How wonderful! David, I think we can sell this."

"Really? Really, truly?"

"Yes. If Bertine agrees, we'll put it on display at the shop."

"I wonder if it'll sell. I hope it does."

ISABELLA broached the topic with Bertine, showing her what David had made.

"I know you're busy, so thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me about this."

"Oh, don't worry about it," Bertine said with a smile. "So this is the bracelet David made, hm? It's wonderful! I quite like it. I think it'll sell."

"Then might I put it on display in the shop?"

"Of course. I hope someone buys it."

A few days later, the black and silver bracelet sold. A young man came into the shop seeking a present for his mother's birthday. When he saw the bracelet David made, he stumbled to a halt in surprise and stared intently at it.

Isabella stood at the counter, her face expressionless though her heart pounded with nerves. The young man continued inspecting the bracelet with his eyes and hands. After a few moments, he nodded decisively.

"I'd like this embroidered handkerchief and these earrings to be gift-wrapped, but this bracelet is for me, so no need for special wrapping."

"Thank you very much! You'll be happy to know that the bracelet is a young artisan's first work. I have a feeling he'll be quite pleased. Thank you again for your purchase!"

"Oh, really? Then this makes me his first fan, doesn't it?"

Isabella placed the handkerchief and earrings in a gift box and carefully wrapped it in decorative paper bearing the design of the krusula flower. She finished it off with a neatly tied ribbon.

"Would you like me to place the bracelet in a paper bag? Or would you rather wear it immediately?" she asked.

"Hm. You know, I think I'll put it on right now."

The young man tried slipping the bracelet onto his left wrist by himself. But it refused to cooperate as he struggled to fasten the clasp.

"It can be quite difficult putting it on the first time. I recommend placing your wrist on a table to keep it immobile. This way, it's much easier to fasten the clasp."

Isabella took his left hand and demonstrated what she meant to him. When she looked up, she found the young man's face

flushed with color. *Oh?* Confused by his reaction, she nevertheless accepted his payment and thanked him for it. He hurried out of the shop with his purchase.

THAT night, Isabella told David the good news when she returned home.

“It sold! David, your bracelet sold! Congratulations!”

At her announcement, her son froze, eyes wide, mouth agape. She beamed cheerfully at him and he launched himself at her, hugging her tightly.

“Did my bracelet really sell? Really, truly?!”

“Yes, really, truly. The customer put it on right away before he left.”

“Wow! Wow, wow, wow!”

“Wow, indeed. You did well, David. Good job.”

For the rest of the night, David kept repeating the words, “Wow. My bracelet sold. It sold!” Then he started work on his next bracelet right away. He used black onyx again with small silver beads this time. Three of the silver beads followed by one onyx bead. It was a simple but sophisticated design.

One week later, the same young man visited the shop again. And on this occasion as well, he said he would buy David’s bracelet.

“I have to tell you, the first bracelet I bought was incredibly popular,” he said. “My friends asked me where I bought it, so I told them about this store.”

“Thank you very much. I’ll inform the artisan, and I assure you he’ll be delighted once more.”

Naturally, David was over the moon when she told him that night. He decided to create his third bracelet.

Much to Isabella’s surprise, the same customer visited the shop again, a week later. And once again, he bought David’s bracelet.

“That’s three bracelets you’ve bought now by the artisan. Really, thank you so much for your continued patronage.”

“Not at all. How could I resist such amazing work?”

“Please take this, if you don’t mind. It’s a bonus from me.”

Just when she was about to give him earrings she herself had made using pink crystals, a voice called out to Isabella.

“Mama!”

It was Camilla, her daughter. She held David’s hand as both of

her children bounced into the shop.

“Oh, you’re with a customer. Sorry, Mother,” David said, looking sheepish.

Isabella apologized hurriedly to the young man for the interruption but ended up surprised herself when she saw his expression. He looked dumbfounded.

“Sir, are you all right?” she asked.

“Oh, yes. These are your children, then?”

“They are.”

“I see. I just assumed...”

“I’m sorry?”

“No, it’s just I assumed you were unmarried. I apologize for the outrageous misunderstanding on my part.”

“Well, you’re not precisely wrong,” Isabella said. “My husband died in the war.”

David listened to his mother’s conversation with the customer for a moment, before taking his younger sister’s hand again and quietly moving to the back of the shop. They’d both been instructed repeatedly not to annoy the customers.

“You’re raising those children on your own then?” the young man asked.

“I am. The woman who owns this shop works directly for His Excellency and she generously offered me this job, knowing my circumstances.”

“I see. I do indeed see... Raising them alone...”

The young man walked out of the store, still dazed, but returned two weeks later.

“I’d like to ask you something.”

“Go on, sir. What is it?”

“If, perchance, you don’t currently have a suitor, might you do the honor of allowing me to court you?”

“What?!”

“I, well, I’ve been charmed by you since the first moment I laid eyes on you. I think you’re a wonderful woman.”

“You are aware I have children, yes? You *do* remember seeing them, too?”

“I am. I’d love to take you and them to dinner one night soon, if you’re amenable to the idea?”

Isabelle beamed at him then. She still loved her late husband, but she couldn’t deny the tendril of interest in this earnest young

man. *He seems like a kind person*, she thought to herself.

"I am, gladly. The restaurant I used to work at isn't far from here, so shall we go there? Their beef stew is scrumptious."

"Wonderful! I love beef stew!"

From then on, the young man named Regulo would visit the shop every week to buy the bracelets David made, even after Isabella told him in exasperation he didn't need to. And every time he did, he took Isabella and her children out to dinner.

One day, some time after they established this routine, Isabella told him she disliked the thought of him spending so much money each time. So she invited him to her home, where she cooked dinner for them all. David and Camilla had already become attached to Regulo by then, so they were overjoyed to have him there.

"**YOUR** Excellency, Isabella is getting married," Bertine said.

"Oh? What sort of man is he?" Cecilio asked.

"A frequent customer at Krusula. She told me he's completely won over David and Camilla as well."

"Is that right? I'm glad to hear it then. I'd like to send her a wedding gift too."

"I'm sure she'd be overjoyed at having her marriage celebrated by the Federation's leader. Thank you very much for your thoughtfulness."

She's the kind of person who genuinely celebrates others' blessings. Cecilio smiled easily at Bertine as the thought circled his mind. She'd had both of her engagements destroyed. Yet she sincerely celebrated Isabella's second marriage, a woman who was close to her own age.

There weren't many people like Bertine, he realized. It would have been perfectly normal for her to feel some sort of resentment or jealousy, but she didn't, which he found curious in itself. *That's just another of her virtues, hm?* A pleased smile curved Cecilio's lips at discovering another fascinating side of Bertine.

After that, David would grow into a fine young man and officially start working at Krusula. He became renowned throughout Ybit for the accessories he made. But that was a story many years down the road.



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